COMMUNICATIVE POLITICS AND PUBLIC JOURNALISM

by

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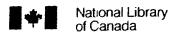
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ii

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critique of a new model of journalism known as public or civic journalism. Public journalism asserts that public life is in crisis, and that journalism, as it has come to be practiced, is partially responsible. Public journalism is an attempt to revitalize public life.

The model is analyzed by identifying and examining public journalism's largely implicit theoretical underpinnings, namely, the communicative theory of American pragmatist John Dewey and German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. The connections between public journalism and these two philosophers are made explicit before turning to an analysis of public journalism in light of critiques made against Dewey and Habermas's communicative theories.

Public journalism is, to a significant extent, an attempt to put Habermas's vision of discursive politics (the theory of communicative action) into practice. Public journalism is then assessed in light of its theoretical and practical connections to the theory of communicative action. Given these connections, public journalism, as a democratic re-thinking of journalism, carries with it the limitations of communicative democratic theory. Moreover, the proponents of public journalism fail to provide a critique of public life that is informed by the historical, political and economic context of the media industry.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

One of the key principles of liberal politics is that democracy is not possible without a free press. The statement is so commonplace as to be almost banal. Since its inception in the early 19th century, the commercial press has linked its legitimacy to the advancement of liberal demo·racy. In North America, in particular, journalists have laboured under, and have drawn intellectual sustenance from, three distinct perspectives of the democratic role of journalism: 1. The libertarian perspective, 2. The social responsibility perspective, and 3. The new, or critical journalism perspective (Osler 1993, Taras 1990).

Formulated by enlightenment thinkers such as John Milton and John Locke, the libertarian model assumes that people are born as rational truth-seekers who are capable of sifting through competing arguments in order to decide the truth for themselves. The model assumes that the truth will eventually prevail through the rough and tumble of argument in a marketplace of ideas. The libertarian insistence on the need of a vigorous marketplace of ideas was initially designed as protection for individuals against the state. The free press was seen as a protector of individual interests. This model was prevalent during the late 18th and early 19th centuries when newspapers were affiliated with major political parties. Later, in the hands of John Stuart Mill the marketplace metaphor took on a social dimension. Mill argued that, not only the individual, but, society as a whole benefited from the free flow of ideas (Osler 1993: 55-64).

The social responsibility model represented a modification of the libertarian tradition. Although it drew on ideas that had been in circulation for some time, the social

1

responsibility model did not fully take hold until the late 1940s with the publication in the U.S. of the Hutchins Report, a product of the Commission on the Freedom of the Press. The Hutchins Report challenged the libertarian model of journalism on a number of points. A socially responsible press would reject the notion of negative freedom and would adopt a positive definition that would assert the press' responsibility to promote socially desirable goals. The social responsibility perspective suggested that the ideal of the free marketplace of ideas had not been achieved. Not all political interests enjoyed equal access to the media to make their voices heard. The press would, therefore, be responsible for representing a genuine diversity of opinion, regardless of people's economic or political clout.

A shift occurred in the 1960s due in no small part to the experiences of journalists covering the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. Confronted with U.S. government propaganda, journalists felt compelled to inject criticisms of government policies into their stories and to expose the "real" story that lay behind official government pronouncements. The social responsibility model encouraged criticism of government institutions and policies; but, according to David Taras, what distinguishes critical journalism from other perspectives "is that journalists, as professionals and as delegates of the audience, have an obligation to comment on as well as report the news" (Taras 1990: 54). According to Taras this obligation "usually meant criticizing politicians and government" (Taras 1990: 54).

More recently, a new model has been added to the journalistic register. It is called public or civic journalism. Relatively unknown outside of journalistic circles, public

journalism represents a significant shift in thinking about the role, purpose and practice of journalism. It is in part a reaction against a widely perceived public cynicism toward politics (Rosen 1994a, Merritt 1995). Primarily an attempt to rejuvenate democratic journalism by reaching out to the public, public journalism suggests that journalists reevaluate their profession with an eye toward helping the public become participants in the democratic process. It is offered as a partial requirement for a form of participatory democracy.

This thesis is a critical assessment of the theory and principles that lie behind public journalism. It will not endeavour to examine public journalism on an empirical level - there are in fact still relatively few examples of this style of journalism to examine; instead, it will explore the philosophical underpinnings of the emerging model. This focus is necessary because the proponents of public journalism, Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt, do not detail how and why Jürgen Habermas and John Dewey, the two main intellectual sources of public journalism, influence the model.

In Chapter One, I position public journalism as a partial answer, to what is considered to be, the collapse of public life in North America. I then sketch out the central platform of the model, explaining how public journalism rethinks the long assumed role of journalists as detached observers of public life. Chapter Two explores the communicative political theory of John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas. The chapter unearths Dewey's and Habermas's pragmatic principles and then indicates how those ideas correspond with public journalism. Chapter Three makes the link between Habermas, Dewey and public journalism more explicit and then goes on to assess public journalism in light of the

critiques made against the two theorists. Finally, Chapter Four argues that the proponents of public journalism are not fully aware of their theory's own contradictions - particularly with regard to its appraisal of the code of objectivity and the effects of market forces on news production. I argue that the goal of public journalism - a public engaged in rational-critical discourse about public life - cannot be achieved without changes to the market driven interests of the media industry.

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT IS PUBLIC JOURNALISM?

Public journalism starts from the premise that public life is not working properly. It begins with the observation that public life is sick; and it suggests that journalism must be a catalyst in an effort to promote healing. More than that, public journalism insists that if journalism is to be relevant it must ensure that public life is revitalized. At root, public journalism is at once a theory about the legitimacy of journalism as well as a partial prescription for the improvement of public life. The two goals are locked in a symbiotic relationship. This chapter will explain that relationship by detailing the sociological and historical conditions cited as having spawned public journalism. It will then illustrate the central purposes of the emerging model and it will contrast those with some of the general criticisms that have been levelled against it by the journalistic community.

The Crisis of Public Life

Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt, the two main proponents of public journalism, refer to a U.S. survey conducted by the Yankelovich Monitor which suggests that confidence in public institutions dropped significantly from 1988 to 1993. In 1988, 18 per cent of respondents said they had confidence in the U.S. federal government. That number had declined to 12 per cent in 1993. Public confidence in doctors, during the same period, slipped from 71 to 63 per cent. The results were even more dramatic for journalists:

confidence in news reports on television was cut in half, down from 55 per cent to one quarter of respondents. Confidence in newspapers fell from 50 to 20 percent, while only 12 per cent said they trusted magazines in 1993, down from 38 per cent in 1988 (Yankelovich Partners 1993, quoted in Merritt 1995: xv). In 1994, a Times-Mirror survey found that 71 per cent of respondents thought that the news media got in the way of society solving its problems. Only 25 per cent were of the opinion that the media actually helped solve problems (Merritt 1995: x·).

The sense of malaise felt by the public is also reflected in the news industry itself. Traditionally a low paying profession, journalism has relied upon other aspects of the job to attract and keep new blood. Some reporters are enticed by the perceived glamour of working near politicians and other newsmakers: the thrill of being the "first to know" has its appeal; while others are drawn to the profession by the desire to contribute something positive to society - by the idea of witnessing and writing the truth about public life. However, surveys indicate that job satisfaction is in decline. A poll of American journalists reports that in 1993 one in five journalists said that they would likely leave the profession in five years (double the figure in 1982-1983) (Merritt 1995: 4). All of this data points to a climate of crisis both in democratic public life and journalism, the main conduit of public information and discussion. Why? Is the lack of trust amongst members of the public a result of a general failure of the welfare state to manage the economy and other social issues, or is it that journalists simply need to look inward? Do journalistic precepts need to be rethought? According to the practitioners of public journalism the failures of public life are many and varied but journalism, as a major public institution, must shoulder

its share of responsibility; that means turning the gaze inward to examine past and present journalism practices with a critical eye.

Rosen points out that journalism has traditionally considered its main enemy to be government. The fear of government intrusion has led journalists (particularly in the United States) to staunchly defend their right to free speech. Politics is normally conceived as an activity that takes place within/between government and public institutions. That is where the journalistic watchdog is to keep its eyes trained. But, says Rosen, the current crisis facing journalism is not the result of government action or malevolent leadership. "It is changes in the broader culture that undermine public life, weaken the demand for good journalism and compel a serious response" (Rosen 1995a). Rosen argues that there is a growing "disconnect" in American society. People turn on the TV news or pick up a newspaper only to find partisan politicians denouncing each other with extreme arguments that do not reflect people's daily lives. Appearances by political figures are stage managed to the point where they take on an almost cartoon like character. A concise illustration of the problem is provided by Merritt who mimics the advice of a prototypical political handler:

> While your man is standing still, make sure he says nothing of substance. Then say something pungent but pointless, preferably about the opponent, and jump on a bus or plane for the next stop. The trailing pack of journalists has no choice but to hastily rip out a new lead or a sound-bite and race for the next stop, fearful, despite all recent evidence to the contrary, that something meaningful might occur on the next tarmac or courthouse square. (Merritt 1988, cited in Rosen 1995a)

Not surprisingly, says Rosen, people are turning away from politics and public life.

Citing the recent work of Robert Putnam, Rosen suggests the disconnection/alienation felt by the public toward politics and the media extends throughout civil society (Rosen

7

1995a). Putnam argues that fewer and fewer people in the U.S. are joining civic organizations like PTA's, theatre groups or even bowling leagues. Putnam uses results from a 20 year comparative study he conducted on sub-national governments in Italy (Putnam 1993) to argue that "the norms and networks of civic engagement" (Putnam 1995: 66) affect the performance of representative government. In fact, the best run local governments, he says, were those that had "longstanding traditions of civic engagement" - where, using de Tocqueville, civic engagement reflects the commercial, industrial, intellectual and moral associations of civil society (Putnam 1995: 66). It is through the use and development of these traditions of civic engagement that "social capital" is produced: the "features of social organizations such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1995: 67). These networks of interaction encourage "generalized reciprocity," as well as "social trust" and in turn, Putnam argues, allow for the resolution of collective problems. These templates of civic engagement produce examples of future success and in the end broaden the participants' sense of attachment to others (Putnam 1995: 67).

Putnam's analysis of public life can be criticized, particularly in relation to other countries like Canada where it is not clear that civic participation has declined so drastically. Nevertheless, Putnam's arguments are accepted by Rosen who is quick to point out that among the most important indicators of civic engagement found in Putnam's study was newspaper readership. People were far more likely to be engaged in public life if they read a newspaper (Rosen 1995a). In North America, where both public engagement and newspaper readership are in decline, Rosen suggests that Putnam's analysis resonates with

8

meaning and significance. Putnam's work suggests that there is a direct link between the health and vibrancy of journalism and a well functioning and interconnected civil society. Following Putnam's lead, the question for public journalism thus becomes: how to help foster a healthy public life in which people join together in a discussion about their shared problems and their common destiny as citizens? Public journalism is an attempt to create a vibrant public sphere.

Rethinking Journalism's Connection to the Public

All journalists ply their trade in the name of the public. The "public's right to know" is often raised as justification for being given access to such things as government documents, testimony of trials, and even the sordid particulars of political sex scandals. The public has always been, as James Carey says, "the god term of journalism ... the term without which the entire enterprise fails to make sense" (Carey 1987: 5). Public journalism acknowledges this affiliation, and, citing Carey, Rosen contends that the media must rethink their relationship to the public:

> The real problem of journalism is that the term which grounds it - the public - has been dissolved, dissolved in part by journalism. Journalism only makes sense in relation to the public and public life. Therefore, the fundamental problem in journalism is to reconstitute the public, to bring it back into existence. (Carey 1987: 14 cited in Rosen 1994c)

In 1644, John Milton defended the need for a free press by saying that God had given humanity the ability to reason so that it could be used as a tool for deciding between good and evil. Censorship of the press, in Milton's view, amounted to a negation of God's will,

9

for without competing arguments humankind is incapable of reason: "[W]ho kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but hee who destroyes a good Booke, kills reason it selfe, kills the Image of God (Milton 1644 cited in Keane 1991: 13). According to Rosen and Merritt, journalism's god term is, if not dead, in very poor health - not from censorship, but from a vacuum of publicly exercised reason. Public journalism wants to see journalists help the public reason together.

From the perspective of Rosen and Merritt, the current relationship between journalism and the public is one of information provider and information consumer.[1] The media's responsibility is to provide clear, concise, accurate and fair information. That information is sometimes analyzed, but once it is delivered the media's obligation is considered to have been met. Whether the public is able to use the information, or how it makes use of it is considered, under the prevailing wisdom, to be beyond journalism's mandate. What is privileged above all in journalism's professional code is a stance of detachment. Under no circumstances are journalists to enter into the political fray. Journalists are assumed to operate outside politics. Public journalism takes exception to that position. It argues for a new role for journalists, one that envisions journalists and the public as civic partners. Good journalism, says Rosen, requires journalists to acknowledge their immense role in the political process and to accept partial responsibility for the quality of public life.

The media's professed professional detachment does not ensure its neutrality. As Rosen says, the simple act of naming a front runner in a political campaign ensures the

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The complexities of this relationship, particularly as it relates to the market, will be discussed in Chapter Four.

10

candidate further coverage and at the same time detracts from those candidates who didn't receive the label. The "feeding frenzies" and pack-reporting involved in political scandals can also destroy a politician before he/she has had a chance to become fully known to the public. As well, investigations of political corruption are by their very nature designed to elicit legislation to correct an alleged abuse. Rosen adds that these examples do not even begin to illuminate the far larger impact of daily editorial decisions to place a story on the front page or not to run it at all (Rosen 1995a).

The code of objective detachment is also used, says Rosen, as a shield against criticism. Anyone who comes to the press with a complaint about coverage is seen to be subjective. Those, he says, who are "subjective, who have a stake, are almost by definition unqualified to pass judgement on the objective operation of the press. One of the most insidious effects of objectivity is that it creates a world in which journalists can live without criticism, because they're the only judges of what's objective" (Rosen quoted in Glaberson 1994). This point is of vital importance to supporters of public journalism. The objective stance is considered legitimate because it is thought to ensure the trustworthiness of the media; but, in the view of public journalists, it has the added effect of further distancing the public from journalism and the events it seeks to describe. Journalists report on events involving politicians, or other elite members of society, whose business is carried out in a seemingly faraway realm, a domain which often bears little resemblance to the practical concerns of ordinary people.

Public journalism agrees that journalists must remain politically independent. Neither Rosen or Merritt wish to return to the days of partisan publications controlled by powerful

political interests or media barons. The key, says Rosen, is how this independent institution will act:

> If we describe it simply as providing facts, we're going to miss a lot of what this institution does ... The political drama given to us by the press is dominated by professionals in politics, by insiders, by discussions of strategy and technique and manipulation. It is almost exclusively a story of conflict and controversy within the political class, and it is increasingly out of touch with the rest of the country and out of step with the problems we face as a democracy. (Rosen quoted in Glaberson 1994)

Public journalism acknowledges that part of what animates the public's anomie regarding public life is a general disgust with the political status quo of elite accommodation. More than that, public journalism believes the stories being told by journalism, the tales of corruption, greed and political chicanery, are driving the public away from public life. The very stories that are offered to the public as a tool for making sense of the world are fuelling a deep cynicism and distrust of all things political. What is proposed instead is a different way for the independent institution of journalism to act. As a first step public journalism offers a reassessment of journalism's "god term." It asserts that:

- Journalists cannot do their job without an engaged public.

- The public's role must extend beyond being a spectator and target audience.

- Public involvement in discussions about public life forms the necessary social capital on which the craft is built.

- Journalism will cease to have any relevance if the stories it tells no longer address practical public concerns with an aim towards developing that social capital.

Public journalism acknowledges that the press is a "player" in political life and it announces an end to neutrality on certain issues: *journalists must help increase the participation of*

others in public life and they must ensure a wide ranging debate on issues of importance.
Journalists cannot be seen to be advocating a particular position, what Rosen calls "doing politics;" but, he says, neutrality loses its purpose if it means standing by and allowing silence (or one might add, partisan shouting) where reasoned debate should be taking place (Rosen 1994: 11). An engaged public - composed of people who reason together - is, therefore, an outcome of good journalism. Public journalism, in essence, is a move away from what Carey calls an "information" model of communication to a "conversational" model (Carey 1987).

Journalism, Democracy and Information

Before writing a story journalists must first ask themselves who they are writing it for. Newspapers and broadcasters have intended audiences they are trying to reach. Who that audience is determines the type of story they write: the issues attended to, the style of language and overall presentation are all affected by the audience. Highbrow broadsheets aim at a more conservative business readership, while tabloids are often filled with tales of the much trod-upon "little guy" fighting city hall. Public journalism demands that members of the public be considered as something other than readers or viewers, as something more than a target market. Public journalism wants journalists to write for their fellow citizens who share a stake in how well democracy functions; it wants to facilitate public deliberation and conversation. At issue is how a democratic journalism should address the public.

The purpose of democracy, says Merritt, (Merritt 1995: 7) is the process of "jointly deciding about things." This dynamic, he writes, requires:

■ "Shared, relevant information."

■ "A method or place of deliberation about the application of that information to public affairs," and ...

■ "Shared values on which to base decisions about that information."

On the question of information, it is commonly thought that the free flow of information is a prerequisite of a properly functioning liberal democracy. The goal is in accord with a long-standing libertarian influence.

In the modern context, information is readily available, to the point of overflow. In the age of the burgeoning "500 channel universe" and the much hyped "information superhighway," people are swimming in information. The problem is not the quantity but the quality of information. Rosen frames the matter in this way: "Traditional thinking in the press assumes that democracy is what we have, and information is what we need. Public journalism says: reverse the proposition, and you'll be closer to the truth. Information is what we have - in the media age, information is everywhere - and democracy is what we need" (Rosen 1995a). Remembering that democracy is defined as the process of deciding things together, public journalism finds itself critiquing the ways in which information is delivered to the public.[2] That delivery system is guided by the

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2

One should note that a lot of the information that is coming on-line via today's new technologies is pay-per-use. Public journalism, therefore, doesn't address the very real obstacle to democracy that is created when a society begins to split into groups that are information rich and information poor.

14

professional code of objectivity.

According to Merritt, (Merritt 1995: 20) objectivity holds that if a news source is quoted as saying "A" the reporter is obliged to find someone who will say "Z." The journalist, particularly if he/she is a beat reporter, will know exactly where to go to find an expert source who will counter the original claim. Invariably, the source represents an extreme position which further polarizes the issue. The journalist has done what is expected. He/she has provided "balance"and has, simultaneously, inserted an element of conflict (a key news value) into the story. The public, viewing the story framed as a choice between two extremes, fails to see their own (sometimes more prosaic, but no less important) concerns represented. As a result, the public opts to ignore further discussion of the matter. The simplistic frame misses the many shades of opinion that could possibly fall between (or outside) positions A and Z and as a result the public has been defined out of the story. In support of the argument, Merritt cites an American study (Weaver and Wilhoit 1992) that found less than half of the journalists surveyed felt it was "extremely important" to give people a chance to comment on public affairs (Merritt 1995: 20).

Merritt and Rosen are not the only critics to draw attention to this dynamic in journalism. Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) and Bennett (1988) have noted how news discourse has traditionally focused on elite sources and has isolated members of the public. Bennett frames his discussion in a four part typology of information biases in news which reflect some of the concerns voiced by public journalists. First, news is personalized. Complicated issues are often reduced to stories of personal tragedy which become symbolized by individuals. Bennett argues that such stories encourage people to take an

egocentric view of the world as opposed to a more socially concerned perspective. Second, news discourse usually dramatizes an issue. Drama is a natural outcome of a focus on personalities, crisis and scandal as opposed to sustained inquiry into public affairs. Concentration on personalization and drama, leads to Bennett's third quality of news information: fragmentation. The connections between events, their causes and political contexts are lost amidst the steady flow of seemingly isolated happenings. Bennett's final bias of news information is normalization. Because journalists continually seek out officials and other elite sources, the confusing and troubling events that appear in the daily news are explained and funnelled back to the public using dominant norms, values and beliefs. Counter explanations informed by the practical experiences of the many other people who constitute the public are rarely heard (Bennett 1988: 23-64).

Public journalism does not contain a critique of the market to the same extent as that found in Bennett's work; still public journalism shares a concern that news discourse serves to further alienate the public from public life. Rosen and Merritt want to try and foster shared values and norms which can be used to resolve public issues, but they insist those norms can only have legitimacy if they are produced through collective inquiry, including members of the public as well as the political and professional elite.

The Cult of Toughness

The media and politicians are locked in a symbiotic relationship. Politicians require a vehicle for reaching the public with their ideas and political platforms and, in turn,

16

journalists require steady and reliable access to politicians. Without such access it would

be impossible for them to do their job. More will be said about the radical critique of this

relationship provided by such scholars as Herman and Chomsky (1988) in Chapter Four.

For the moment, however, I wish to focus on public journalism's belief that a healthy

relationship between journalists and politicians is a good thing for democracy. The

predicament, says Merritt, is that the necessary link between government and journalism

has been corrupted. Since Vietnam and Watergate the press has entrenched its adversarial

stance to the extent that it is a celebrated feature of journalism's own folklore. To a

significant extent, it is argued, the archetypal story for journalism has become the

discovery and exposure of political corruption and scandal. There is, after all, no bigger

feather in a journalist's cap than having forced the resignation of a political figure. Merritt

agrees with the standard journalistic wisdom that says all journalists should have a healthy

scepticism, however, what must be guarded against, he says, is having that scepticism turn

into an adversarial pose which actual thwarts reasonable discussion:

> It is interesting that journalism's binding axiom of objectivity allows, even requires,
> unlimited toughness as a tool as well as a credo, yet it rejects purposefulness -
> having a motivation beyond mere exposure - as unprofessional. Without
> purposefulness, toughness is mere self-indulgence. (Merritt 1995: 61)

Purposefulness, says Merritt, should be thought of "as a vehicle and not a destination"

(Merritt 1995: 63). Public journalism supporters believe that the cult of the "tough

question" - "Minister, have you ever beaten your spouse?" - should be exposed. The

adversarial stance, it is thought, simply leads to official denials and admonitions - "I've

never beaten my spouse." - followed by an escalation in rhetorical word games that reduce

the quality of public discussion: "Minister Denies Beating Spouse." The above example

17

(my own, not Merritt's) is not intended to diminish the very serious crime of spousal abuse; rather it is meant to indicate that there is no "safe" answer to a question thus phrased. When faced with the "Gotcha" question, one either admits to one's guilt or one denies it; either way you are caught in a web of implied wrongdoing. The question is designed to create a dynamic that is filled with conflict and drama, more than it is intended to ascertain any truth, or to help resolve any particular problem. The really tough questions, says Merritt, are those that are designed to help "public life go well" (Merritt 1995: 63).

Making Public Life Go Well

Making public life "go well" is an oft quoted slogan of both Rosen and Merritt borrowed from philosopher Michael Sandel. "When politics goes well," writes Sandel, "we can know a good in common that we cannot know alone" (Sandel quoted in Rosen 1992: 10). Rosen and Merritt want to see public life flourish through the disclosure, give and take, and reflection that comes with public dialogue. The purpose of public discussion, they believe, is to enlighten people about their community, the divisions that cause separation and the ties that could possibly bind people together. Public discourse should reflect the concerns and desires of community life in order that collective problems can be understood and resolved. In this way public journalism is not only envisioning a new way to do journalism, but a new way of conducting political life. No particular political agendas - left or right - are to be favoured; the only non-negotiable commitment is open, reasonable and sustained debate (Rosen 1992: 10).

18

One of the difficulties of modern life is that it is hard to make connections between events, problems and possible resolutions to those problems. Following the thinking of Neil Postman, Merritt suggests that the media's information glut serves to further atomize the public, the result being "a neighbourhood of strangers and pointless quantity; a world of fragments and discontinuities" (Postman quoted in Merritt 1994: 24). To counter this perceived trend, public journalism turns to a three stage model of public consultation developed by Daniel Yankelovich (1991). Yankelovich suggests that one of the things that journalists do extremely well is raise public consciousness about issues. Newspapers and broadcasts are filled with a daily catalogue of happenings from foreign wars to the minutiae of local municipal council meetings. Important issues crop up continually, but they are constantly under pressure from other matters. No sooner does the media raise public awareness about a particular question than another, seemingly more urgent, matter is thrust upon the waiting public. Public journalism, following Yankelovich, believes that journalists must move beyond the consciousness raising stage and help the public "work through" issues in search of their root causes, their implications and, most importantly perhaps, make clear what kinds of "core values" are at stake - core values being the beliefs and interests that lie behind individual opinions. Rosen and Merritt believe that unless competing core values are made explicit and addressed no progress can be made toward the third stage of public deliberation: resolution (Merritt 1994: 23-24). More will be said about Yankelovich's argument (a key element of public journalism) in Chapter Three, but for the moment I wish to stress public journalism's claim that this process is essential to a healthy public life and the future relevance of journalism. Journalism, it is argued, must

19

become interested in the fate of the community; that means dropping its adopted pose of detached smugness and working towards developing common understandings and social progress through open deliberation. In this way public journalism embraces a theory of inquiry which:

- Details how people, individually and collectively, learn and formulate knowledge.

- Shows how the public can use that knowledge.

- Has a direct relationship to democracy, and,

- Can be adopted by journalism as a means of furthering democratic journalism.

Public journalism prescribes a method of inquiry that involves collective reasoning which, if used constructively, it is claimed, can bring a vibrant public - journalism's god term - into being.

Complaints & Queries

Due to public journalism's relatively young age (the idea has only been discussed since 1988) few people outside of the journalism profession are aware of its existence. That, however, has not stopped the emergence of a significant number of detractors. Rosen has grouped these complaints into five general categories which allege that public journalism is: "1.) no real departure from what has always been done by good journalists in good newsrooms; 2.) a misguided if well-intentioned effort that mistakes journalism for a community organizer or social service agency; 3.) a dangerous intrusion of 'advocacy' into the politically neutral space of the news; 4.) a marketing gimmick or public relations stunt

20

that substitutes a feel-good populism for the re-investment in news gathering that serious journalism demands; 5.) a surrender of professional judgment to the whims of the mass audience" (Rosen 1995a).

I do not intend to examine these criticisms on an individual basis. It must be said that, for the most part, I agree with Rosen that these criticisms are superficial. That is because the critics (mostly other journalists) do not address the fundamental principles and philosophy that underpin the model. To suggest that public journalism can be reduced to either misplaced desires for activism, a cheap marketing technique or the tyranny of the mass audience is seriously to misunderstand public journalism's goals and proposed method. I will argue in Chapters Three and Four that the market does seriously impair public journalism's ability to achieve its goals, but that argument, I suggest must be informed by a complete understanding of public journalism's principles.

Rosen tells us that public journalism is about helping to foster a new kind of "public politics" (Rosen 1992: 10). If one is to provide a fair and rigorous critique of the theory one must first understand what is meant by public politics: its intellectual and philosophical origins as well as its intent. Journalists cannot alone be held accountable for this lack of inquiry. Part of the responsibility lies with Rosen and Merritt, themselves. Neither Merritt's book, *Public Journalism & Public Life: Why Telling the News is Not Enough*, nor the booklet he co-wrote with Rosen, *Public Journalism: Theory and Practice*, mention the two thinkers who developed the underlying philosophy presented by public journalism: Jürgen Habermas and John Dewey. In fact, the only exceptions to this practice seem to be Rosen's writings aimed at the academic community:

21

> The argument public journalism makes is derivative of academic theory. It is borrowed from the work of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas on the public sphere, from John Dewey's great book, *The Public and Its Problems*, and from the writings of James Carey. (Rosen 1995b: 35)[3]

But even here, Rosen does not seem concerned with explaining the link between the two men. He simply states the connection without providing any follow up. The main reason for public journalism's relative silence on this issue appears to be Rosen's desire to bring the discussion out from the sometimes impenetrable debates of the academic community and into the public realm:

> It is more than odd, it is faintly disturbing, that two of the most important books yet written on the problem of "the public" are virtually unreadable by non-specialists. The appearance in English translation of Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* may be a welcome event for scholars, but it is a non-event for, say, readers of the *Atlantic*, to say nothing of *Time's* subscribers. Similarly, within communication studies John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* has been treasured for years as a noble reply to Walter Lippmann's dismissive treatment in *Public Opinion*. But as Carey among others has noted, *The Public and Its Problems* is "a maddeningly obscure book." (Rosen 1991: 267)

Rosen seems to be more concerned with ensuring that Dewey's and Habermas's ideas are *used* by journalists instead of getting academic credit for explicating those ideas. Rosen wants "media intellectuals" to "go public" with their debates about the public sphere (Rosen 1994c).

Dewey and Habermas can be read as two of the most forceful champions of discursive or communicative politics. Their work argues that the only way to resurrect the public from its fragmented and alienated state is through the development of non-coercive

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[3]

Carey is cited as a third influence, but, while his writings contribute to an understanding of public journalism, his work is still derivative of the ideas first developed by Dewey. For this reason, I focus my attention on the link between Dewey and Habermas.

communication at all levels of society. Public journalism is an attempt to put the theories

of Dewey and Habermas into practice.

CHAPTER TWO

JOHN DEWEY, JÜRGEN HABERMAS AND PUBLIC JOURNALISM

In the previous chapter I noted that Davis Merritt defined democracy as the process of

deciding things together. Embedded in that definition is an assumption about democratic

communication; deliberation concerning practical problems is conceived as a collective

effort involving all citizens, not only professional experts or their political masters.

Proponents of public journalism argue that public life has become highly fragmented and is

in the grip of a political malaise. Not only does the public harbour a deep resentment

toward the political class, but it also doesn't trust the media to help bridge gaps in

understanding between groups or to help resolve social and political problems. Public

journalists, such as Merritt and Jay Rosen, suggest that journalism, as it is currently

practiced, actually contributes to the public's political alienation.

By insisting that the public be included in a discussion about public life, public

journalism is proposing a new method of journalistic inquiry, in essence, a new theory of

knowledge. The professional code of objectivity has provided journalism's primary

framework of inquiry and it has been used to give the craft legitimacy. Following the

canon of Western scientific tradition, journalists conceived themselves to be impartial

observers who collected and distributed facts about public life to waiting audiences. In

this chapter, I examine what for Merritt and Rosen are the unexplained roots of public

journalism in the theories of American pragmatist John Dewey and the German

philosopher critic Jürgen Habermas. I shall compare their critiques of objectivism to show

that Habermas and Dewey provide the key to understanding public journalism's desire to revitalize public life through enhanced pragmatic discussion in the media. Public journalism, I argue, is a product of the philosophical tradition of pragmatism. Public journalism wants to help the public discover itself through pragmatic inquiry.

Linking Habermas to public journalism may, at first, seem odd. Habermas is known as one of the contemporary torch-bearers of German "critical theory" - a branch of 20th Century Marxism founded by the so-called Frankfurt School theorists, most notably Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. The Frankfurt School saw pragmatism as another form of positivism and scientific control (Horkheimer 1972: 196, and Hardt 1992: 217-237). Pragmatism offered an illusion of progress while leaving intact the material conditions that perpetuated class domination. Other writers in Marxist tradition, such as George Novack, have attacked the "uncritical sense of progress" in pragmatism, "a theory which tends to depreciate theory as such at the expense of practice and to degrade principles below experimentation" (Novack 1975: 28). For orthodox Marxists, pragmatism can be critiqued for disregarding the rule-based science of Marxism in favour of a view of nature and society that is indeterminate (Novack 1975: 17). With Marxism, pragmatism rejects the Cartesian distinction between mind and body and with it the assumption that knowledge lies antecedent to historical practice. But instead of trying to discover the material factors that determine knowledge, pragmatism aligns itself with applied ideas. Pragmatism is reduced to a theory of what works, not what should be.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the basics of what Dewey and Habermas mean by pragmatism. In reviewing their positions I will argue that pragmatism cannot be

reduced to a vulgar notion of "technical-instrumental rationalism," and that, in fact, both

Dewey and Habermas were vehemently opposed to such a notion. I will argue that

Habermas sought to move beyond the traditional Marxist focus on labour power and the

forces of production, in favour of a study of language and communication; and that this

shift led him on a search for a way to anchor rational thought. Habermas's search forms a

striking parallel to Dewey's work explicating knowledge as pragmatic inquiry. It is this

shared method of inquiry that, I argue, public journalism is predicated upon.

Dewey's Pragmatic Struggle

Alfonso Damico suggests the best summation of pragmatism is provided by Dewey

who said "all deliberation is a search for a way to act" (Damico 1986: 84). This suggests

that life, or experience, is a constant struggle of overcoming. People are saddled with the

burden of living within an environment which must be dealt with.

> The human being has upon his hands the problem of responding to what is around
> him ... It is obliged to struggle - that is to say, to employ the direct support given
> by the environment in order indirectly to effect changes that would not otherwise
> occur. (Dewey 1960a: 24)

Dewey called his philosophy instrumentalism. In his view, philosophy's role is to help

people overcome the problems and dilemmas confronting them daily. The usefulness or

correctness of an idea is to be found through its application in concrete experience, not

through the discovery or appeal to an antecedent universal truth. Knowledge is produced

via experience.

Critics of Dewey's instrumentalism rail against its indeterminacy. From a Marxist

26

perspective, Novack views pragmatism as a philosophy untroubled by contradictions because it refuses "to recognize the objective reality of contradiction" in society. As a result all hypotheses are welcome (Novack 1975: 76). For C. Wright Mills, Dewey's philosophy doesn't provide a way of resolving conflicting values "so much as it obscures them by making 'inquiry' the answer to all such conflicts" (Damico 1986: 84). Problem solving thus becomes a matter of *technique*, not purpose; politics becomes an exercise in trial-and-error, incremental reform and compromise (Damico 1986: 84).

While there is truth in the above critiques, particularly in the modern context where pragmatism is usually thought of in terms of a useful compromise, Damico points out that Dewey's pragmatism cannot be reduced to a simple "technical-instrumental rationality" (Damico 1986: 84). Damico draws on Richard Bernstein (1971) to argue that there is both a high and low sense of practice and that these concepts correspond to "Aristotle's distinction between two forms of practical wisdom: production and action" (Damico 1986: 85). Production speaks to the view that the value of an idea lies in its usefulness. A productive idea is one that has a practical result. Production is thereby strictly aligned with technical use and control. While this definition clearly captures a side of the pragmatic position, Damico argues that a deeper understanding of Dewey is found in the high sense of practice.

> Praxis as action is better exemplified by Aristotle's notions of the good citizen or the virtuous man. Such practice is an end in itself, in that what counts is doing the activity well. Similarly, for Dewey, the analysis of practical activity uncovers a set of higher-order concepts and values. - communication, community, participation - which both define and should govern successful (i.e., practical) social interactions. (Damico 1986: 85)

Regarding "praxis as action" provides an opportunity to reassess Dewey. Pragmatism is

27

no longer troubled by indeterminacy and the absence of values. Instead, practice becomes

the site where individuals try to realize fundamental values. This shift in focus allows us to

view pragmatism as a philosophy that is concerned, not simply with the consequences of

applied ideas, but, with how one thinks about ideas. Pragmatism is a commitment to

experience; it is an understanding that the struggle to know is not isolated within the

individual, but is located in experience itself. Dewey believed in scientific inquiry, but for

him scientific inquiry is something that one *does* in the context of a particular social

environment.

This definition is made clearer if we distinguish between Cartesian and pragmatic

epistemologies. Descartes and his followers believed that truth was fixed. It was,

therefore, the job of the contemplative-self to master the logical skills needed to excavate

the hidden truths of the objective world. Knowledge is located in the mind. Dewey

thought this view to be nonsensical. Knowledge, he writes, is located in the individual

experience of concrete situations.

Damico suggests that Dewey's philosophy is an attempt to unite the contemplative and

active life. Subject-object theories of meaning have no need for everyday experience.

They rely on experts trained in the art of discovery, description and classification, who use

their knowledge to control and modify nature for particular ends. Dewey on the other

hand believed that the everyday experience of people, not only provided a check on those

expert discourses, but, *was* the basis of knowledge itself. Dewey unites the contemplative

and active worlds by distinguishing between *precognitive* and *indeterminate* experiences.

Precognitive understandings are those meanings which are shared among people and are

taken for granted because they meet the needs of a situation. These shared understandings form the cultural milieu and create the basis for a stable society. Meanings become indeterminate when for some reason one's experience comes into conflict with one's previous understanding of social life, or with another person or group of persons' understanding. Inquiry then becomes a matter of *reconstituting* social life by searching for possible ways of making the indeterminate situation determinate (Damico 1986: 86).

> To *perceive* is to acknowledge unattained possibilities; it is to refer the present to consequences, apparition to issue, and thereby to behave in deference to the *connections* of events. As an attitude, perception or awareness is predictive expectancy, wariness. Since potential consequences also mark the thing itself, and form its nature, the event thus marked becomes an object of *contemplation*; as meaning, future consequences already belong to the thing. (Dewey 1981: 143)

A pragmatic decision means looking for a solution to an indeterminate event. It means comparing one's precognitive or intersubjectively shared understandings of social reality with the present and searching for a way to reconstitute a determinate or stable situation. Inquiry is not necessarily a conservative act - although it can be used to preserve the status quo - rather, it is a method of questioning the incongruities of lived experience. Take for example someone who was raised by her parents to believe in the value of the Protestant work-ethic, but whom, after remaining honest and hard-working suddenly finds herself unemployed for a long period of time. Unable to find work, she is forced to reassess her old values and discover a new way of interpreting her predicament (possible structural reasons for her unemployment), while at the same time implementing some sort of action designed to resolve her problem (look for work). In this way, knowing (contemplation) is linked to doing (action) (Damico 1986: 87). In other words, the only way to know what an idea means is to know how one can use it. Meaning is not a fixed truth capable of

29

being discovered by an individual; it is a result of the individual's interaction with her

environment.

> Truth and falsity are not properties of any experience or thing, in and of itself or in
> its first intention; but of things where the problem of assurance consciously enters
> in. Truth and falsity present themselves as significant facts only in situations in
> which specific meanings and their already experienced fulfilments and non-
> fulfilments are intentionally compared and contrasted with reference to the question
> of worth, as to reliability of meaning, of the given meaning or class of meanings.
> (Dewey 1977: 118)

Knowing is, thus, not tied to individual consciousness alone, it is linked to the individual as

an actor. Seen in this light, pragmatism is not simply a philosophy which relies on

technique for some useful purpose. *Pragmatism is a way of living one's life in a

rational/intelligent manner within the context of a physical and social environment.* By

coupling the contemplative and active worlds Dewey is arguing that shared activity,

participation and communication all play a role in the individual search for knowledge.

Social practices are created, maintained, challenged and reconstituted through interaction

(Damico 1986: 88).

Damico suggests that when Dewey's pragmatism is extended to social theory it

becomes clear that he did not promote a "technical-instrumental rationality." Dewey is

advising us that technical knowledge and its application by knowledgable individuals

cannot alone result in a practical solution to a problem, instead, the answer lies in common

deliberation and collective action (Damico 1986: 89).

> Society not only continues to exist *by* transmission, *by* communication, but it may
> fairly be said to exist *in* transmission, *in* communication. There is more than a
> verbal tie between the words, common, community, and communication. Men live
> in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and
> communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common ...
> consensus demands communication ... A democracy is more than a form of

30

government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint experience. (Dewey 1966: 4, quoted in Damico 1986)

Dewey is building a case for a more democratic conception of society - one which politicizes public life. The politicization of the public is, of course, one of the main goals of public journalism. Rosen and Merritt believe that people have turned their backs on public life because they cannot see the relevance of politics, as represented in the media, for their daily lives. Public journalists want to share relevant information in an effort to "jointly decide things together;" while, politics for Dewey, explains Roberto Alejandro, is "the public exercise of judgement through cooperative ties" (Alejandro 1993). Dewey argues that when knowing is detached from the social environment, and from the consequences of action, the individual becomes atomized:

> Efficiency in production often demands division of labor. But it is reduced to a mechanical routine unless workers see the technical, intellectual, and social relationships involved in what they do, and engage in their work because of the motivation furnished by such perceptions. The tendency to reduce such things as efficiency of activity and scientific management to purely technical externals is evidence of the one-sided stimulation of thought given to those in control of industry - those who supply its aims. (Dewey 1966: 86)

This, Dewey says, is the predicament of the public. Public life has become so complicated by developments of commerce and industry that people can no longer make practical sense of their world. The public doesn't recognize itself in the operation of public life and, as a result, forfeits its right to participate; that, says Dewey, is the origin of political apathy (Dewey 1927: 134-135). The public is lost and bewildered by the complexity of modern life and as a result it is eclipsed. The public, Dewey suggests, can only be called into existence through attention to the "serious consequences of conjoint and interacting behaviour" (Dewey 1927: 126). In the context of journalism, as long as these

31

consequences are missing from public life, say Rosen and Merritt, journalism will be without a public, without a god term with which to make sense of its own practice.

Habermas's Struggle with Technical-Instrumentalism

Like Dewey, Habermas is also interested in a notion of politics which has its origins in Aristotle's conception of action; however, in Habermas's case the comparison with Aristotle is completely self-conscious and not the result of a scholarly re-reading of his work. In this regard, Bernstein informs us that Habermas is primarily concerned with the confusion between practical and technical politics (Bernstein 1976: 185-200).

In "Theory and Practice," Habermas contrasts Aristotle's classical notion of politics with the modern approach, first articulated by Thomas Hobbes. Habermas informs us that "the old doctrine of politics" was a formulation of the "good life", or the life well-lived; but it also "referred exclusively to *praxis*, in the narrow sense of the Greeks. This had nothing to do with *techne*, the skilful production of artifacts and the expert mastery of objectified tasks" (Habermas 1973: 42). Politics was about the "cultivation of character; it proceeded pedagogically and not technically" (Habermas 1973: 42). As well, practical politics, in the Greek sense, differed from scientific inquiry because it could not be held to the same rigid standards of empirical truth. The just and proper life was historically dependent; therefore, "the capacity of practical philosophy is *phronesis*, a prudent understanding of the situation" (Habermas 1973: 42).

In contrast, Hobbes envisioned politics as the science of technical control. Human

32

beings, he argued, if left to their own devices, inevitably fall into conflict and war. The aim

of politics is thus the establishment of a method of minimizing such conflict. Hobbes

wished to create a scientifically grounded social philosophy which aimed "at establishing

once and for all the conditions for the correct order of the state and society" (Habermas

1973: 43). In Hobbes' version of politics, the translation of knowledge into practice

becomes a technical problem; his vision of politics is ahistorical and disregards specific

circumstances (Habermas 1973: 43).

Bernstein tells us that the contrast between scientific possibility and practical need

allows Habermas to formulate, what is for him, the essential question of political theory

(Bernstein 1976: 186). *"How, within a political situation, can we obtain clarification of*

what is practically necessary and at the same time objectively possible?" (Habermas

1973: 44; quoted in Bernstein 1976) Habermas wants to save the classical notion of

practical politics - the promise of the prudent orientation to daily life - without breaking

completely with empirical science. The problem, according to Habermas, is that the

modern world has fallen under the control of technical-rationalism. When searching for

models of how best to organize social life, humanity appeals to reason for guidance, but it

does so with an aim toward control, not enlightenment. The Greek notion of practice

guided by deliberation and theory is lost.

> Socially effective theory is no longer directed toward the consciousness of human
> beings who live together and discuss matters with each other, but to the behaviour
> of human beings who manipulate. (Habermas 1973: 255)

Because of this shift, Habermas believes modern societies are no longer able to

"distinguish between practical and technical power" (Habermas 1973: 255). Society is

divided into spheres of social organization: science, technology, industry and administration - each charged with the responsibility of technical management within its sphere of influence. Forgotten in this equation are citizens. When the art of politics is the efficient administration of resources, and not an attempt to overcome practical everyday problems, there is no need to consult with the public. Theory becomes alienated from praxis (Habermas 1973: 255).

> When theory was related to praxis in a genuine sense, it conceived of society as a system of action by human beings, who communicate through speech and thus must realize social intercourse within the context of conscious communication. Through this communication they must form themselves into a collective subject of the whole, that is capable of action - otherwise, the fortunes of a society ever more rigidly rationalized in its particular parts must slip away as a whole. (Habermas 1973: 255)

In Habermas's view technological-rationalism is an ideology which, to the extent that it permeates social relations, alienates individuals.[4]

We see here a second rough parallel between Dewey and Habermas - a concern with communication. Both men envision a society which is anchored in communication and not technical control, but they approach the same problem from different angles. Dewey begins his inquiry through a rethinking of the epistemological assumptions of the Enlightenment, whereas Habermas's overall project begins with a more direct examination of the factors responsible for alienating citizens from political life - two different paths

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My understanding of how Habermas defines ideology is informed by Terry Eagleton. Eagleton writes that, for Habermas, ideology "is a form of communication systematically distorted by power - a discourse which has become a medium of domination, and which serves to legitimate relations of organized force." Eagleton, Terry (1991). Ideology: An Introduction, London, New York, Verso.

leading in the same direction.

Habermas's emphasis on political alienation puts him in step with his Frankfurt School predecessors who also criticized the enlightenment. Where Habermas differs is on the question of how one overcomes such alienation. Both Horkheimer and Adorno criticized positivistic readings of Marx, but Horkheimer still insisted that critical theory be grounded in the "universal concept" of labour power as "commodity exchange," for it was this basis that rooted Marxism to a concern with social justice (Horkheimer 1972: 226, 242). This early version of critical theory was wedded to the traditional Marxist dualism between labour power and the forces of production; whereas, Habermas shifts the focus to language and communication (Diggins 1994: 417-420). Habermas argues that Marx goes too far in equating the "science of man" with the natural sciences and that this creates a positivistic strain in his work. Above all, Marx's greatest error was to reduce "the process of reflection to the level of instrumental action. By reducing the self-positing of the absolute ego to the more tangible productive activity of the species, he eliminates reflection as such as a motive force of history" (Habermas 1971: 44).[5] Habermas fears the reduction of politics to technical control - a mistake made by Lenin which was taken to horrifying extremes under Stalin (Bernstein 1976: 217). Habermas believes the hope of personal and political emancipation lies in critical intersubjective-reflection. The only way to curb the oppressive nature of the instrumental "system" (The world of rigidified

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For a full explanation of Habermas's critique of Marx see Chapter Three of: Habermas, Jürgen (1971). Knowledge and Human Interests, Trans. Jeremy Shapiro, Boston, Beacon Press. Also see: Bernstein, Richard (1976). The Restructuring of Social Theory, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, pp. 188-189.

bureaucratic administration) is to create an emancipated "lifeworld" (A world of non-coercive public communication.). Such a lifeworld would challenge the system, and in time, *reconstitute* society and its administrative organizations into more democratic institutions.

Both Habermas and Dewey believe the *locus of social change is intersubjective-reflection.* As Diggins explains, "for Habermas, too, interests coincide with cognition, since all knowledge arises out of problems that humans encounter in a changing environment. Knowledge can be neither purely objective nor disinterested but instead is historically situated and interest-grounded" (Diggins 1994: 418). How did Habermas come to this conclusion? In his search for a way of balancing the benefits of shared practical inquiry found in Greek politics without relinquishing the strength of empirical science, Habermas looked beyond Adorno and Horkheimer's earlier critique of enlightenment epistemology and found inspiration in ideas provided by American pragmatism (Habermas 1971: 91-112). It was there that he found a place to anchor rational thought while protecting it from the dangers of technical-instrumentalism, or what he would later call strategic action. His solution was the theory of communicative action.

Theory of Communicative Action

The first cornerstone in Habermas's theory of communicative action is provided by Charles Sanders Pierce. Pierce, the person most often credited with establishing American pragmatism, asserts that the real strength of science is not that it provides insight into the

transcendental conditions of knowledge, but that it is reflective and intersubjective.

> In sciences where men come to agreement, when a theory has been broached it is considered to be on probation until this agreement is reached. After it is reached the question of certainty becomes an idle one, because there is no one left who doubts it. (Pierce 1955, quoted in Murphy 1990: 12)

What Habermas took from Pierce was the logic of scientific methodology, not the notion that science is an exemplary form of knowledge.

> The genuine achievement of modern science does not consist primarily in producing true, that is correct and cogent statements about what we call reality. Rather, it distinguishes itself from traditional categories of knowledge by a method of arriving at an uncompelled and permanent consensus of this sort about our views. (Habermas 1971: 91)

The scientific method thus alleviates, what Pierce calls the "irritation of doubt," and provides a way of solving disputes in a non-coercive manner. But while Habermas accepts Pierce's methodology, he rejects his belief that a "community of inquirers" could eventually discover the underlying truths in nature (Murphy 1990). By clinging to such a transcendental notion of truth, Habermas believes Pierce leaves the door open for instrumental action, prediction and control. Pierce recognizes that people can only know the world to the extent that rational inquiry provides a basis for shared belief. But Pierce still insists that underneath social beliefs and norms lies an objective foundation which can eventually be understood. In the end, inquiry is still geared toward success. In Habermas's eyes this fault compromises Pierce's entire pragmatic theory. For Habermas, knowledge is not ultimately a reflection of nature; it is instead a product of the symbolic interactions of people. If the dangers of instrumental action are to be fought, the object of inquiry must be consensus and understanding, not success (Habermas 1971: 91-112; Diggins 1994: 417-422). To resolve this problem, Habermas finds a safe haven for rational inquiry in the

pragmatics of language.

Drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein and pragmatist, George Herbert Mead, Habermas suggests that "the grammar of language games discloses the lifeworld dimension of intersubjectively shared background knowledge that supports the pluralized functions of language" (Habermas 1992b: 63). In effect, Habermas is referring to the same phenomenon as Dewey when he talks about mutually shared precognitive understandings. Habermas argues that society exists to the extent that people share meanings expressed in language. If those intersubjectively shared meanings break down, social stability is lost. Society is thus reconstituted through the intersubjectively reflective process of pragmatic inquiry. New meanings, or norms, are constructed through intersubjective discourse resulting in the re-establishment of common understanding and community. With Dewey, Habermas is concerned with uniting the contemplative and active life through non-coercive pragmatic inquiry.

Dewey talks vaguely about the healing power inherent in communication, of how "to understand is to anticipate together, it is to make a cross-reference which, when acted upon, brings about a partaking in a common, inclusive, undertaking" (Dewey 1981: 141). But while Habermas agrees with Dewey about the healing potential of communication, he is much more explicitly aware of the power of the system to corrupt public communication. In a direct attack against modern politics, and the public relations industry which it supports, Habermas writes that the "bureaucratized exercise of power has its counterpart in a public realm confined to spectacles and acclamation" (Habermas 1970: 75). Like Dewey, Rosen and Merritt, Habermas is concerned about the health of public

life. The modern public sphere, he believes, is devoid of discussion about issues of practical significance; discussion concerning the values and norms of society is absent; instead, the public's role is limited to the act of voting. The only way to revitalize the public sphere (or in Habermasian language, to rationalize the public sphere), he believes, is to, in some way, approach the ideal conditions for non-coercive and open communication. The goal of communicative action as opposed to strategic action, therefore, is "to bring into the open," what Habermas maintains is "the rational potential intrinsic in everyday communicative practices" (Habermas 1992a: 442). Habermas accomplishes this purpose by orienting mutual understanding to validity claims.

The pragmatic perspective does not consider the validity of a sentence or speech act to be an objective relation between language and the world. Instead, validity claims are embedded in the process of communication. Speech acts are validated by person *B* agreeing or disagreeing with the statement made by person *A*. Habermas maintains that "mutual understanding aims at consensus formation," and, "for this reason, the comprehension of a speech act already points to the conditions for a possible agreement about what is said" (Habermas 1992b: 74). Every speech act can be criticized as invalid from three perspectives: how it takes up relations with the objective world, the subjective world and the shared social world. Each of these three modes points to a set of conditions which would validate the speech act. Before *B* can understand what *A* means, *B* must first have some knowledge about the conditions that would validate the statement or claim.

> We understand a speech act when we are acquainted with the kind of reasons that
> a speaker could cite in order to convince a hearer that he (the speaker) is entitled
> under the given circumstances to claim validity for this utterance. For this reason,
> familiarity with a language is interwoven with knowledge of how things do actually

39

stand in the (linguistically disclosed) world. (Habermas 1992b: 78)

So, where Habermas believes "understanding an expression means knowing how one can make use of it in order to reach an understanding with somebody about something," (Habermas 1992b: 78) Dewey writes that the heart of language is ...

> ... communication; the establishment of cooperation in an activity in which there are partners, and in which the activity of each is modified and regulated by partnership. To fail to understand is to fail to come into agreement in action; to misunderstand is to set up action at cross purposes. (Dewey 1981:141)

In this way, *both Dewey and Habermas locate the practical, as a standard for rational behaviour, in communication.*

Communicative action is distinguished from strategic action by its reliance on non-coercive, intersubjective deliberation. No speech act can be considered communicative unless it is characterized by certain non-reducible standards: 1) The participants must cooperate by using mutually understandable and criticizable validity claims with an aim toward understanding. 2) The participants must be prepared to act on the potential agreement if the validity claims are deemed sufficient (Habermas 1992b: 79-80). Dewey points to the standard of rational behaviour implicit in pragmatic communication, what he calls intelligence, but it is Habermas who makes the explicit empirical case for its existence and potential use as a barrier against strategic, or instrumental action.[6]

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The use of the term empirical is clarified by Thomas McCarthy: "Habermas's project is empirical - not in the sense of the nomological sciences of nature but rather in the sense of the reconstructive approaches that have been developed above all in linguistics and cognitive developmental psychology. As Habermas sees it, the basic idea behind this type of approach is that speaking and acting subjects know how to achieve, accomplish, perform, produce a variety of things without explicitly adverting to, or being able to give an explicit account of, the structures, rules, criteria, schemata on which their performances

Thus far, I have established four principal similarities between Dewey and Habermas:

- A fear of the alienating and non-democratic potential of technical-instrumental

  rationalism.

- A rejection of Cartesian epistemology in favour of a philosophy that views knowledge

  as historically situated and interest-grounded (strategic or communicative).

- A belief that the locus of social change inheres in the process of reflection and

  intersubjective pragmatic inquiry.

- That the practical, as a standard for rational behaviour, is located in communication.

These similarities add up to a mutual desire to locate democratic politics within the process

of open, critical and non-coercive public communication.

Rosen and Merritt do not describe public journalism using the above language, but, by

their own admission, they are using the concepts (Chapter One). Public journalism:

- Is concerned with how the art of politics has become the privileged domain of

  politicians and other expert professionals who conduct their business in a seemingly

  obscure netherworld which has little in common with the life of the public; as a result,

  the public is alienated from politics, or in Dewey's words is eclipsed.

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are based. The aim of rational reconstruction is precisely to render explicit the structures, rules underlying such practically mastered, pre-theoretical know-how, the tacit knowledge that represents the subject's competence in a given domain." McCarthy, Thomas (1982). "Rationality and Relativism: Habermas's Overcoming of Hermeneutics," Habermas: Critical Debates, Eds. John Thompson and David Held, Cambridge, London, MacMillan, cited in Alejandro, Roberto (1993). Hermeneutics, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere, New York, State University of New York Press.

- Challenges the traditional view held amongst journalists that individuals can gain knowledge by reviewing information in isolation; knowledge about common interests and problems is instead developed through joint discussion with an aim toward mutual understanding of underlying core values.

- Is committed to using that newly discovered knowledge to resolve those problems, and

  ...

- Is committed to open public discussion being used as the standard by which journalism should be judged, itself.

Dewey, Habermas, and public journalism by extension, are devoted to a type of democratic practice which is at odds with more traditional notions of liberal democracy, to which I now turn.

Liberalism, in its classic 19th century and pluralist 20th century constructions, assumes that individuals are self-contained rational truth-seekers who are capable of assessing truth claims independently. In other words, liberalism adopts the same Cartesian model of knowledge against which both Dewey and Habermas are united. Liberalism defines freedom negatively. It assumes individual freedom is guaranteed once legal impediments are abolished for all, regardless of educational and economic disparities. Freedom is aligned with choice. Once free from coercion, individuals are able to exercise their natural rights and abilities to judge and choose for themselves. The general will, or common good, becomes a matter of negotiation between individual and group interests. In such an environment, decision making is privileged over deliberation and inquiry.

As Damico suggests, "the pluralist's focus on decision making as *the* political act limits

questions about the common good to the nature of the policy adopted" (Damico 1986: 91). The good community becomes one in which individual wants and utilities are maximized through agreement and compromise. "Within such a community it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to see how some more social interest might become a part of that intersubjective awareness that defines the needs of a situation" (Damico 1986: 91).

Both Dewey and Habermas stand opposed to the above formulation of liberalism. They view freedom not as choice, but as the ability to act on choices. *Freedom is identified with reason in practical action.* Dewey and Habermas are concerned with the *process* of public opinion formation. Again, what Damico says of Dewey is of equal relevance for Habermas: "What matters, finally, is not the choice made but the capacity of those choosing to refer their decisions to the *validating* requirements of the needs of the situation" (Damico 1986: 93). Gerald Filson makes a similar observation in his comparison of Dewey and Habermas by distinguishing between perspectives of democracy which privilege organization or association. Filson says both men acknowledge the necessity of organizational relationships "while pointing out that these must be subordinate to overriding processes of free, uncoerced social inquiry" (Filson 1992: 219). Similarly, Rosen and Merritt believe that the public must be made to engage in public discussion so it may see the consequences of public action. From this perspective, democratic life is a process of public inquiry, not individual choices. According to Dewey ...

> The belief that thought and its communication are now free simply because legal restrictions which once obtained have been done away with is absurd. Its currency perpetuates the infantile state of social knowledge. For it blurs recognition of our central need to possess conceptions which are used as tools of directed inquiry and which are tested, rectified and caused to grow in actual use. (Dewey 1927: 168)

43

Presaging Habermas's thesis that the oppressive logic of the system must be balanced by the rational public inquiry of a reconstituted lifeworld, Dewey argues that the absence of a vibrant public has banished rational thought to the "insulated branches of learning" (Dewey 1927: 171). Stepping into this void have been agencies of publicity, advertising and propaganda. As a result, the intellectual life of the public is subject to "sloppiness, superficiality and recourse to sensations as a substitute for ideas" (Dewey 1927: 168). Reflecting concerns articulated by Dewey and Habermas, public journalists are appalled by the staged political events which are so common in media portrayals of public life. It is not sufficient, says Rosen, for the press to demystify these pseudo events; it is, in part, this cynical demystification which has been a component of the new critical journalism (since the time of Watergate) that has contributed to the alienation of the public. Journalism, says Rosen, "needs a new way of seeing - not less sceptical, but more useful for a society that needs to learn again how to discuss issues and solve problems" (Rosen 1995a). The answer, he says:

... is to strengthen, in any practical way that can be found, all the forces that pull people into civic affairs, engage them in the give-and-take of political dialogue, make participants out of spectators, and illuminate the promise of public life. The press can be one of those forces, and a deeper professional identity can be fashioned around these central themes. (Rosen 1995a)

Practical politics for Habermas, Dewey and public journalism means the politicization of the individual through the creation of a public concerned with inquiry as common or shared experience. For Dewey, democracy is not "an alternative to other principles of associated life. It is the idea of community life itself" (Dewey 1927: 148). Dewey and Habermas believe in the power of a radically re-defined liberalism. Radical democratic

practices are those which work to unleash the productive power inherent in conjoint activity and rational communication. Radical-liberalism thus stands in opposition to the atomizing tendency of classic liberalism and its reliance on strategic or instrumental action.

Public journalism is thus committed to creating a foundation upon which public differences can be aired and solutions found for the myriad of social, political and economic problems facing society. To do less, Rosen and Merritt imply, is to reject the possibility of democratic public life itself.

CHAPTER THREE

PUBLIC JOURNALISM AND ITS PROBLEMS

Jay Rosen, the primary theoretician of public journalism, believes that journalists

should subscribe to *"public politics"*. The term is meant to differentiate between other

forms of politics adopted by journalists such as *electoral politics; interest group politics*

and *image politics*. Journalistic coverage of *electoral politics* is about winners and losers

and the competition for votes by established political parties. Coverage of *interest groups*

normally settles into the recounting of claims and counter claims of various lobby groups,

while, *image politics* describes the realm of "spin doctors" and their manipulative game of

controlling the meaning, and outcome of political life (Rosen 1992: 10). In each of these

cases the role of the public is reduced to that of passive observer or voter, not participant.

By using the term *public politics* Rosen is attempting to re-think journalism so that it

includes the public as a meaningful participant in the political process - a process of self-

government through the deliberation of a rational-critical public.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the communication implications and philosophy

behind the political theory of Jürgen Habermas and John Dewey - two theorists whose

ideas form much of the philosophical base of public journalism. Both have written about

the eclipse of the public sphere as an arena of rational-critical discussion concerning the

ends and values of political life. I concluded that while Habermas and Dewey are products

of differing traditions, they converge in significant ways that ally them as forceful

proponents of a radical-liberal version of communicative politics. This convergence, I

suggested, took the form of four basic points: (p.38)

- "A fear of the alienating and non-democratic potential of technical-instrumental rationality.

- A rejection of Cartesian epistemology in favour of a philosophy that views knowledge as historically situated and interest-grounded (strategic or communicative).

- A belief that the locus of social change inheres in the process of reflection and intersubjective pragmatic inquiry.

- That the practical, as a standard for rational behaviour, is located in communication."

These points form the basis of a discursive democratic politics which acts as a check on bureaucratic and technical forms of power.

In this chapter I attempt to make the connections between public journalism and the theories of Habermas and Dewey more explicit. I will argue that public journalism is, to a significant extent, an attempt to put Habermas's vision of discursive politics (the theory of communicative action) into practice. I will then critique public journalism in light of its connection to the theory of communicative action on both a theoretical and historically informed level. On the basis of that discussion I conclude that public journalism, as a democratic re-thinking of the "craft," carries with it the limits of communicative democratic theory. I also argue that the two main proponents of public journalism, Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt Jr., cull the ideas of Habermas and Dewey selectively , and in so doing strip public journalism of a critique of public life that is informed by the historical, political and economic context of the media industry.

47

Public Opinion: Re-working an Old Problem

By asking journalists to accept partial responsibility for the health of public life, Rosen and Merritt have assigned journalists the task of trying to soothe one of the nagging doubts of liberal democratic theory - whether public opinion can be trusted to guide political deliberation. In tracing the historical ambivalence towards public opinion, John Keane summarizes the dilemma by reference to Hegel: "public opinion ... deserves to be as much respected as despised" (Keane 1982: 11). Uncertainty regarding public opinion is also reflected in the writing of Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville believed that society could not exist without some level of "common belief," but that "it may be foreseen that [*the public's*] faith in public opinion will become for them a species of religion, and the majority its ministering prophet" (Tocqueville 1945:12).[7] Dewey and Habermas hold an equally ambivalent attitude toward public opinion; but, as we have seen, (Chapter Two) instead of fearing the "tyranny of the majority," or the "subjective opinion of the many," (Habermas 1989: 119) they oppose the corruption of public opinion by technical-instrumental and bureaucratic interests - interests of money and power which, in Habermas's words, affect a "refeudalization" of society (Habermas 1989: 181).

I will temporarily bracket the questions raised by the influence of money and capitalist forms of power on public opinion so that I can trace public journalism's link to a critique of

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[7]

Habermas quotes both Hegel and de Tocqueville in his own discussion of the ambiguity of public opinion in: Habermas, Jürgen (1989). The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, pp. 121 and 134.

technical-instrumental rationality. Rosen places public journalism within this tradition when he suggests that "face-to-face talk is just as vital as information through the mass media" (Rosen 1991: 270). The statement requires some unpacking. Rosen argues that by adopting the objective role of observer - the chronicler of fair, accurate and seemingly unbiased information - journalists have unwittingly adopted another form of bias which privileges technical information. Rosen believes that "journalists made a mistake years ago when they more or less accepted the results of polls as their working definition of public opinion" (Rosen 1992: 25). Journalists, along with pollsters, defined public opinion through the measurements of "volatility, reliability and margin of error," and as a result "abandoned their duty to improve it" (Rosen 1992: 25).

The historical roots of the news media's reliance on technical information has been well documented by Daniel Hallin who argues that "the changing conventions of journalism" from its partisan origins prior to the 1830s to the eventual adoption of objectivity in the 1920s "paralleled the rise of science as a cultural paradigm against which all forms of discourse came to be measured" (Hallin 1985:129). Journalists such as Walter Lippmann trumpeted their faith in facts over values. The public, in his view, was a mere "phantom" and could never be expected to guide political deliberation. It was Lippmann who perhaps did the most to legitimate the notion - among journalists - that politics was best left to technical experts. Lippmann did not believe that journalism could fulfil its democratic mission. The best that could be expected was that journalists would reflect the opinions and discoveries of scientific specialists. Lippmann's solution to the problem of how to create a democratic public capable of makir 3 informed decisions was to by-pass the

citizenry. Instead, the public would be led by a rational truth-seeking elite. The key to a more enlightened society was the creation of better public institutions. Meaningful public opinion would result from the media relaying this information to an uncritical, over-tasked and often distracted public (Lippmann 1963: 398-402). James Carey tells us that Lippmann's proposals amounted to a "depoliticization of the public sphere" (Carey 1988: 76). In 1927, Dewey had a similar reaction against Lippmann's view of the public; and, as a result, he developed his theory of communicative politics in *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 1927).

Journalistic objectivity has evolved since the days of Lippmann. His formalistic account of journalism gave way to a more critical style of reporting that found its zenith - in the North American context - in the Watergate scandal. Still, critical as it was, the new journalism had to rely on the code of objectivity for its legitimacy.

> The journalist had to provide analysis without appearing to depart from
> disinterested professionalism. And the easiest way to accomplish this was a focus
> on questions of strategy, effectiveness, and technique, questions that did not touch
> directly on conflicts of interest or clashes over ends and values of political life.
> (Hallin 1985: 130)

The model for this type of journalism, particularly as it relates to elections, is the "horse-race angle and the strategic battle of wits" (Hallin 1985: 126). A good example, in the Canadian context, is found in Alberta where the provincial government, led by Conservative premier Ralph Klein, reversed its decision to contract out hospital laundry services following a boisterous wildcat strike. Instead of focusing on the status and direction of the government's health care and labour policy, reporters questioned whether the premier had "blinked" due to political pressure (Bergman 1995: 41). Emphasis was

50

placed on the question of political strategy and not the practical significance of the issue. The end result of this type of coverage, according to critics like Todd Gitlin, is that it flatters people into believing it is sufficient to understand the "inside game" of politics without ever having to actually participate in a discussion about their lives as citizens. Viewers are "invited to be congnoscenti of their own bamboozlement" (Gitlin 1991: 122).

In direct opposition to the elite-centred model of journalism proposed by Lippmann, and later modified by critical-investigative reporters, "public journalism asks for a shift in emphasis, away from the machinations of insiders, the weekly chronicle of the power game, and the obsession with puncturing politicians' facades" (Rosen 1994a: 16). Instead of delivering information, facts and strategies about political life and then measuring the public's response, Rosen is committed to a journalism that focuses on shared problems and the cultivation of a public mind that can be trusted to deliberate the important questions of: What is to be done?; and, How we shall live our lives? Rosen wants the public to join in a conversation about itself. He wants journalism to help make public opinion trustworthy and, in so doing, establish *quality* public opinion, as opposed to objectivity, as the legitimating principle of journalism. Facts and information, of course, must be reliable. Fact checking and reliable sources will remain a part of public journalism, but instead of being judged on how "balanced" their stories are public journalists want to be known for making public life work.

In addressing the problem of public opinion, Rosen and Merritt rely heavily on the writings of Daniel Yankelovich and his concept of "public judgement." Public judgement is defined as "that state of highly developed public opinion which exists once people have

51

engaged an issue, considered it from all sides, understood the choices it leads to, and accepted the full consequences of the choices they make" (Yankelovich quoted in Rosen 1994a: 14). Public opinion is not thought of as a measurable object "but as a process by which a political community comes to understand and debate its choices" (Rosen 1992: 26). Seen in this way, the task of journalists is to encourage the *process* of public judgement.

Yankelovich's thesis, in his book *Coming to Public Judgement*, is that a new balance must be struck between the public and experts. Yankelovich takes aim at what he calls the "Culture of Technical Control." Society, he suggests, is fixated on the technical control of "the economy, the physical environment, provisions for food and shelter, threats to health and longevity, national security and conquering space" (Yankelovich 1991: 8). The Culture of Technical Control - simply another name for technical-instrumental rationality - is responsible for many of the benefits of modern industrialised society, but it still can't help the public decide which values should guide it. However, those values can be defined, Yankelovich proposes, through the process of public judgement. It is at this point that Yankelovich's debt to Dewey and Habermas becomes particularity strong. The term public judgement was defined by Dewey as an investigation into the "social consequences" of public policy (Dewey 1927: 180). "Opinions and beliefs concerning the public presuppose effective and organized inquiry" (Dewey 1927: 177) by members of the public. It cannot be left to academic and elite discourse.

> No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few ... The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That *is* the problem

of the public. (Dewey 1927: 208)

Dewey is the first to sketch out the problem confronting public journalists. Expert

opinion, he suggests, cannot be left to guide the public; the work of experts must be

informed by enlightened public opinion. But, in searching for a method simultaneously to

counteract The Culture of Technical Control and to ground public opinion, Yankelovich

does not rely on Dewey. His argument hinges instead upon Habermas's theory of

knowledge. I explained in Chapter Two how Dewey and Habermas believe that

knowledge is historically situated and interest grounded. Knowledge is always oriented

toward some kind of purpose or action. In Habermas's words, those action spheres are

either strategic (oriented to control and manipulation of the objective world) or

communicative (open and non-coercive). This dualism is based on Habermas's earlier

distinction between three categories of knowledge: the objective world of physical things,

the subjective world of inner experience and the social world of shared norms or values

(Habermas 1971; Yankelovich 1991: 215-219). The latter two were collapsed into the

category of communicative action. Yankelovich accepts these categorical distinctions and

with them the idea that public opinion can be developed through the process of validity

claims made with reference to, not only the objective realm of strategic interests, but also

the subjective and social worlds. (Yankelovich 1991: 215-219)

> Knowledge remains tied to purpose. When our purpose is control over nature,
> objectivist knowledge is appropriate, involving instrumental reason. When our
> purpose is mutual understanding to realize common goals and values, another type
> of knowledge - and another facet of human reason - is more appropriate. Here we
> want *communicative action*, (emphasis added) with public judgement as an
> important aspect of it. (Yankelovich 1991: 218)

The tests of good public judgement, Yankelovich suggests, are *purpose*, *truth*, and *proof*.

We know that the stated purpose of public judgement, is "mutual understanding to realize common goals and values." However, the second criterion, truth, is more problematic. One of the difficulties of finding truth, as it applies to the social and subjective realms of human experience, is that it is often hard for two or more people to agree on what it is. In fact, Yankelovich explains that historically, beginning with Plato, opinion and truth have been considered opposites (Yankelovich 1991: 225). People perceive the world in a variety of ways, and, as a result, come to differing conclusions as to where truth lies. Following the distinction between instrumental and communicative forms of knowledge, Yankelovich suggests that when the aim of inquiry is not manipulation and control, a diversity of opinions is actually a benefit, not an impediment. Yankelovich makes the point by paraphrasing Hannah Arendt's conception of "representative thinking."[8]

> When people sharing a common purpose examine an object, each one begins to see that object from his or her own point of view with a richness of perspective not possible when the object is seen from only one angle. Perhaps that is why knowledge of certain kinds of truths can only be gained by, as it were, comparing notes, that is, by seeing reality from a variety of perspectives. (Yankelovich 1991: 229)

This perspective on public judgement adopts a view of truth that is in line with Habermas. Truth, when referring to the social and personal realms, is not divined by experts trained in the scientific method, but is instead arrived at via the process of non-coercive

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Yankelovich glosses over the differences between Arendt's agonistic model of the public sphere and Habermas's more discursive formulation. However, for the purposes of my own argument, the main point made by Yankelovich still holds - that truth can be arrived at via intersubjective inquiry. For a full discussion of the differences between the two models see: Benhabib, Seyla (1992). "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas," Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics, New York, Routledge.

intersubjective argumentation. Truth is what the public agrees to be the case. *Truth is*

aligned with consensus.

How competing truths come to be accepted is determined through a process of

validation - an offering of proof. Yankelovich says the proof of public judgement "has two

meanings: putting what you think you know to a formal test and the pragmatic meaning -

producing practical results the society values" (Yankelovich 1991: 232). In this way

public judgement adopts *the practical, as a standard for rational behaviour.*

The three tests of public judgement mirror Habermas's own test of communicative

action. The name he gives this test is "universal pragmatics." Habermas's thesis (alluded

to in Chapter Two) is that the seeds of rational consensus exist apriori within all speech

acts. By taking a propositional stance the speaker: 1. Implicitly accepts that a consensus

on the propositional content of the speech act is possible; (*purpose*) 2. Is willing to act on

the potential agreement; (*purpose*) 3. Believes the proposition is true; (*truth*) and, 4. Uses

mutually intelligible validity claims toward reaching the agreement (*proof*) (Habermas

1992: 79-80). It is this so called "essence of reason," (Yankelovich 1991: 224) that

Yankelovich takes from Habermas when he reformulates universal pragmatics into the

purpose/truth/proof trinity. Habermas and Yankelovich admit that the main prerequisite

for communicative action rarely exists in real contexts - that being the assumption that all

participants in a speech act refrain from using coercion. However, both believe their

version of the "ideal speech situation" can be used to test the quality of public discussion.

Going a step further, Yankelovich believes:

> Habermas redefines the concept of human reason, deemphasizing its identification
> with logic and analysis and emphasizing instead its biological rootedness in the

universal human ability to communicate across barriers of language and culture. It is *this* concept of reason that is reflected in public judgement. (Yankelovich 1991: 215) (emphasis added)

Communicative action contains the key democratic principle running through public journalism: that, *through the process of mutual recognition in dialogue all subjects are treated as if they are equal partners.* "Everyday communication," says Habermas, "makes possible a kind of understanding that is based on claims to validity and thus furnishes the only real alternative to exerting influence on one another in more or less coercive ways" (Habermas 1990: 19). It is this principle that allows Rosen, Merritt and Yankelovich to claim that by cultivating public judgement journalists can circumvent the expert/public dichotomy. According to the principles of communicative action, when journalists engage the public as a conversational partner they are doing so, implicitly, as equals whose aim is mutual understanding and agreement.

Journalism and Public Judgement

Rosen and Merritt propose that journalists use public judgement as a guide for making public life "go well." Journalists should take an active role in making sure the public decides things collectively. That commitment, Merritt suggests, requires: "shared information of relevance; a method or place for discussing the application of that information to public affairs; and shared values on which to base decisions about information" (Merritt 1994: 22). The goal of public journalism is informed and well considered democratic consensus.

What then, given what we know about public judgement and communicative action, would public journalism look like? How would it be practiced? Rosen and Merritt stress that "public journalism is not a formula; it is a philosophy." It is, says Merritt, a way of liberating journalism from "its artificial constraints" (Merritt 1994: 26). Public journalism allows journalists to do more than play the role of observer and distributor of technical and strategic information. Following Yankelovich's three step process of public judgement, public journalism demands that journalists, not only raise public consciousness about issues, but that they help the public work through problems with an aim towards resolution. "This involves," says Merritt, paraphrasing Yankelovich, "the realization that the problem must in fact be resolved, then sorting out and compromising competing *core values* (emphasis added) to arrive at democratic consensus" (Merritt 1994: 24). The journalist is no longer an observer and deliverer of facts; he/she is a participant in the process of democratic self-government, whose seeds of success are "wired" into the act of public judgement based on the principles of communicative action.

Merritt offers the example of a possible story on crime. The story would include the standard news elements of who, what, when, where, how, and why, but in addition the public journalist would:

- Try to sort out the competing core values of members of the community as they relate to crime. For example, "personal safety versus individual rights; the purpose of the penal system; punishment versus rehabilitation" (Merritt 1994: 26-27). This part of the process would also require adding shades of grey to polarized issues that are sometimes portrayed in black and white terms. One of the things that Rosen and

57

Merritt stress is that when issues are framed in polarized terms people do not see their own perspectives reflected in the debate; as a result, they avoid or ignore the discussion.

■ Create new ways for the public to engage in debate. This could be as simple as a letter to the editor, "public forums" or publishing lists of organizations so citizens can get involved if they wish (Merritt 1994: 26-27).

■ Report on why authorities have been unable to solve the problem (Merritt 1994: 26-27). What are the practical impediments to consensus and eventual resolution?

■ Report success stories. Stories that encourage the idea that crime can, in fact, be alleviated and which limit the traditional journalistic stance of cynicism. People, they argue, will not become involved in public affairs if they do not see any evidence that concerted action makes a difference (Merritt 1994: 26-27).

To the above list, Rosen adds that public journalists should be more self-reflective about:
1. How stories are framed; 2. Their ability to include the public; 3. How the public is positioned in a story; and, 4. What master narrative they are using. "Facts," Rosen writes, "can't tell you how they want to be framed. Journalists decide how facts will be framed, and that means making decisions about which values will structure a story" (Rosen 1994b). Instead of emphasising conflict or the struggle between competing interests and political parties, the public journalist would frame stories using the "values of conversation, participation," and, "deliberative dialogue" (Rosen 1994b). A story about the inner-city drug trade need not only be framed as a problem of policing deviant behaviour, as defined by an expert legal system; it could also be framed as a means of financial support for

people in a particular community. The drug trade can be viewed as either a "crime or business" (Rosen 1994b).

Public journalists, Rosen says, should also be aware of whom they include in public discourse. During the Persian Gulf War there was a steady stream of military and technical experts paraded on nightly newscasts. Rosen suggests that journalists could have chosen instead to frame coverage around the concept of a "just war." The key element in this framing strategy is moral, not technical and is open to conversation by the general public. By adopting this frame public journalists are saying that the public is more than a collection of passive victims, spectators, taxpayers or consumers. Public journalism calls on the public to exercise its right to discuss political life as individual citizens. In other words, the story of the Gulf War should not be viewed as a spectacle conducted by experts, but as an event in which the public has a direct interest (Rosen 1994b). As Dewey wrote, "a technical high-brow presentation would appeal only to those technically high brow; it would not be news to the masses" (Dewey 1927: 183). When the war is viewed from a moral perspective the public, through public judgement, is capable of joining in a conversation about whether the war should be waged at all and what, if anything, should be done about it.

Finally, public journalists are aware that, as storytellers, they are under the influence of "master narratives." The master narrative, according to Rosen, is "the Big Story that lends coherence and shape to all the little stories journalists tell." In the horse-race metaphor "the master narrative is winning ... who's winning, how they're winning, why they're winning, and so on" (Rosen 1994b). The key, says Rosen, is to adopt a master narrative

that has the health of public life in mind. That, he says, is exactly what the *Charlotte Observer* did in its 1992 campaign coverage. The paper dropped the horse-race model and formed a committee of 500 people who helped pinpoint citizen concerns. The paper's reporters then used questions derived from the committee to guide their coverage. The questions were put to the candidates and if the politicians did not clarify their stands on issues a blank space was left beside the candidates' names. The direction of election coverage was determined by the public and not experts (Spaid 1994).

I have tried, in a preliminary way, to make the links between Dewey, Habermas and public journalism clear. I now wish to turn my attention toward a critique of public journalism that is informed, in turn, by a critique of the weaknesses of communicative politics. Because Rosen and Merritt's use of the term public judgement is closely tied to Habermas's theory of communicative action, I will begin my discussion by naming some of the theoretical problems associated with the theory. I will then complete this chapter with a discussion of public journalism's failure to appreciate the historical, and economic context in which the theory is to be practiced.

The Limits of Ideal Speech

Habermas's theory of communicative action - and by extension the notion of public judgement - may contain the key democratic principle behind public journalism, but it also includes a major flaw. It is predicated on a hypothetical situation that, Habermas and Yankelovich admit, very rarely exists in pure form. Coercion, lying and deception are

ubiquitous; nevertheless, communicative action analyzes "actually existing communication ... *as if* (emphasis added) its participants were already communicatively competent" (Keane 1984: 173). The problem with communicative action is not that, in contradiction to Habermas, people are irrational; the problem lies in the extremely abstract nature of the analysis. As Agnes Heller explains:

> Habermasian man has ... no body, no feelings; the structure of personality is identified with cognition, language and interaction. Although Habermas accepts the Aristotelian differentiation between life and the good life, (Chapter Two) one gets the impression that the good life consists solely of rational communication and that needs can be argued for without being felt. (Heller 1982: 22)

Habermas sees communicative action, and the hope of democratic consensus that it offers, as the sole non-reducible linchpin of public life. As a result, Habermas's cognitive approach to the public sphere does not allow for an understanding of subjects whose lives, as communicatively reasoning human beings, are also informed by their body, gender and historical context. I will first address communicative action's understanding of reason as it pertains to the notion of consensus; following that I will turn my attention to the question of gender and the difficulty it raises with regards to accessability to public life.

Rosen and Merritt define public judgement as a process of consensus formation guided by Yankelovich's three point reformulation of universal pragmatics. The role of the journalist is to foster an enlightened public opinion which can, in turn, be used to guide political life; in Habermasian language the journalist acts as a facilitator of "democratic will formation." However, the possibility of consensus through communicative action, as well as its claim to legitimacy, is called into question by Heller's critique of Habermas. Heller's point of departure is, again, the abstract nature of the theory of communicative

61

action. Heller explains that Habermas is not addressing a historical group or class of people; he is instead addressing "human reason" (Heller 1982: 24). Heller argues that by universalizing his theory in this manner "Habermas is compelled to disregard the whole motivational system of human beings" (Heller 1982: 25). Abstract reason cannot have any interests; that ability lies with living, feeling human beings who take up interests in opposition to other groups. Habermas's theory, Heller says, confuses the *ability* of rational communication with "the *will* to achieve consensus" (Heller 1982: 25). Habermas's social theory envisions societal change accruing incrementally through the growth and dissemination of communicative action. Habermas substitutes pragmatic argumentation for class struggle; (Chapter Two) and in making the switch, Heller says, he overlooks the fact that a "dominating party cannot be brought to listen to an argument or accept any kind of reciprocity unless it is forced to pay attention" (Heller 1982: 27). The key point to be remembered from Heller's critique is not that Habermas has in some way betrayed Marxism; it is that citizens may not choose communicative over instrumental forms of rationality; they may instead "simply follow drives, emotions or habits" (Heller 1982: 29).

Heller's insight is driven home within the context of journalism by Murray Edelman. Edelman, with Rosen and Merritt, believes that news, as it is currently practiced, is primarily a "spectacle" that "people witness as spectators rather than as participants" (Edelman 1988: 35). However, Edelman parts with public journalists on the notion of consensus.

Edelman believes that news "is always a gloss on the phenomenal worlds of individuals

and groups" (Edelman 1988: 93). In other words, people live and work in differing contexts and realities; these contexts help to shape how individuals make sense of news and public life. The news is full of competing explanations for why the social world exists as it does; but, Edelman says, "there is no way to establish the validity of any of these positions to the satisfaction of those who have a material or moral reason to hold a different view. Reason and rationalization are intertwined" (Edelman 1988: 105). Writing with W. Lance Bennett, Edelman argues that the narrative of the "welfare bum" is embraced or rejected depending on people's "material and psychological condition" (Bennett and Edelman: 1985: 160) and not the validity of competing arguments.

> Models of a rational world rest on the premise that human beings take all pertinent information into account in choosing the means to achieve their goals; but in everyday life people notice or ignore news stories according to whether they fit their current concerns and aspirations, typically focussing upon those that have meaning for them regardless of their compatibility with other narratives. (Bennett and Edelman 1985: 161)

Edelman concludes that Habermas's ideal speech situation "provides little hope that political language in the world we inhabit can become something more than a sequence of strategies and rationalizations" (Edelman 1988: 110).[9]

The public that is addressed by public journalism lives in real social relationships and bears little resemblance to the abstract and cognitively disembodied participants in the Habermasian ideal speech situation. Habermas's critical approach to ideology, conceived

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A discussion of the complexity and ambiguity of news consumption is found in Chapter Six of Hartley, John (1989). Understanding News, London, Routledge. For a discussion on the multi-acentuality of signs and their relationship to ideology see McNally, David (1995). "Language, History, and Class Struggle," Monthly Review, July-August, Vol. 47, No. 3, 13-30.

as the dominance of elite knowledge systems over the public, rests on the abstract

distinction and separation of communicative and strategic knowledge. When that

distinction becomes problematized by structured social relations so does the democratic

premise behind public journalism. The insight affects public journalism's conception of the

public. Two issues present themselves at this point: 1. Who constitutes the public if its

unifying principle, reasoned consensus, is a utopian ideal?; and, 2. How can quality public

opinion develop if dominant discursive partners cannot be assumed to possess the will

needed to fulfil the requirements of communicative action?

The first question touches on a central tension within the concept of the public sphere:

whether to consider the public in universal terms or as a collection of autonomous groups.

> Within the concept of the public sphere, there is an unresolved and perhaps
> unresolvable tension, between a tight, authoritative singleness (the public as object
> of a quest for a universal collective subject or a privileged arena of struggle) and a
> more relaxed, decentered pluralism (publicness as something spread liberally
> through many irreducibly different collectivities). This tension reproduces the
> problematic ... of the location of politics. (Robbins 1993: xxi)

Clearly, public journalism, by adopting a form of communicative action, aligns itself with

the universal side of the argument. Habermas's conception of the public sphere, adopted

as it is from the bourgeois liberal model, associates membership in the public with the

ability to abstract oneself from individual circumstances through the use of reason

(Habermas 1989: 50-54). From the beginning, members of the liberal public sphere had to

first leave their individual interests behind. Habermas recognized that the early liberal

version of a rational public was ideological, because it excluded workers and women.

Membership in the public sphere was contingent on one's race, gender and financial

standing (Habermas 1989: 125). Habermas's theory of communicative action is thus an

attempt to preserve the critical potential of public opinion while grounding reason in the universal speaking subject. The theory is not without its challengers. Feminist critics have supplied forceful arguments that suggest Habermas's resurrection of universal reason in the form of communicative action incorrectly assumes that the question of gender and the public sphere is primarily a formal problem of inclusion or exclusion (Fraser 1987; Landes 1988; van Zoonen 1991; Young 1987). Nancy Fraser points out that the liberal public sphere has been conceived as a place where differences are "bracketed" and participants continue "as if" they are equals (Fraser 1993: 10). Fraser questions whether those differences are in fact bracketed. Women may have the vote, but styles of dress and the different uses of language between men and women act as informal barriers to participation (Fraser 1993: 10).

The liberal public sphere has also been viewed traditionally as a place where private people come to deliberate public matters. Fraser notes that it was only after feminists formed counter "subaltern" public spheres that wife abuse was considered an appropriate topic for public discussion (Fraser 1993: 19). This argument is not limited to gender. Fraser argues that it can be extended to include other minority or underprivileged groups:

> Insofar as the bracketing of social inequalities in deliberation means proceeding as if they do not exist when they do, this does not foster participatory parity. On the contrary, such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates. (Fraser 1993: 11) [10]

10

On this point, see: Warner, Michael (1993). "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," Phantom Public Sphere, Ed. Bruce Robbins, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press. Warner argues that "the bourgeois public sphere has been structured from the outset by a logic of abstraction that provides a privilege for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle-class, the normal" (Warner 1993: 240).

Fraser acknowledges that the above statement "accords with the spirit of Habermas's ... communicative ethics" (Fraser 1993: 11). Habermas is after all trying to theorize a non-coercive democratic politics. Communicative action presumes a continual renewal of public discussion; but in theory, and as it is adopted by public journalism, communicative action - or public judgement - addresses reason itself and not socially situated subjects. As a result, I suggest that public journalism's formulation of public judgement has trouble accommodating the more social and corporeal influences on public life. As well, John Keane argues that Habermas's focus on analytical language displaces any consideration of "a kind of metacommunication" (Keane 1984: 174) practiced through the use of one's body gestures or rhetoric. In other words, literary modes of communication are privileged over all others.

Public journalism defines the public as a community that exists by virtue of reasoning together. "Publics," says Rosen, "are formed when we turn from our private and separate affairs to face common problems, and to face each other in dialogue and discussion" (Rosen 1994a: 6). Public journalism assumes that the differences that divide people can be overcome through the pragmatic give and take of argument. This assurance is given by both Dewey and Habermas, but as we have seen it is Habermas who provides the empirical foundation for public judgement. The roots of public judgement, as understood by Rosen, Merritt and Yankelovich, are deeply embedded in an abstract understanding of the public which, I suggest, unduly privileges consensus.[11] Not only is consensus unlikely, given the

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Merritt appears to anticipate this criticism in his discussion of abortion, perhaps one of the most contentious debates in modern society. He suggests that what should be strived for

disparate social lives people lead, but it can be viewed as anti-democratic. Beliefs and core

values are not developed in a purely abstract process of intersubjective argumentation;

they are rooted in material experience. Habermas, I believe, is well aware of this point; the

norms and values that form the intersubjectively created horizon of interests within the

lifeworld are informed by material considerations, but this insight becomes obscured by the

abstract formulation of the theory of communicative action. Habermas's neo-pragmatist

reformulation of reason thus departs from Dewey's understanding of socially situated

"intelligence." For Dewey, "the actuality of mind is dependent upon the education which

social conditions effect" (Dewey 1927: 209).

In his effort to anchor social progress in intersubjective inquiry Habermas has displaced

an historically informed understanding of reason. By addressing reason and not living

human beings, Habermas's theory continues the tradition of placing certain types of subject

matter outside the purview of public life while at the same time overlooking the issues and

justifications which people use to make sense of their lives. One may ask what kind of

democratic consensus exists if it is forged out of an "imagined community" (Anderson

1983)? Public judgement is described as a process that can bring disparate groups

together; but by adopting a notion of communication which privileges consensus in such

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is *consent*, not *consensus* (Merritt 1995: 104). Public judgement would recognize that
some aspects of different arguments, while positive, would have to be given less emphasis
than others so that an agreement that "most people could live with" can be achieved.
However, the key point that marks discussions oriented to consensus is that they involve
open criticism, and not simply negotiation. Consent can be given without the benefit of
critical discussion; it can be awarded based on authority or via a conventional mechanism:
elections. By agreeing that public deliberation involves critical claims to validity Merritt
has accepted a method aimed at a form of consensus.

67

abstract terms Rosen and Merritt forget that people sometimes have extremely good reasons for refusing an accord - reasons that will not be necessarily immediately understood by others because they are a product of different material circumstances.[12]

Any conception of a democratic public sphere must guard against particular interests being generalized to encompass those of the entire public. Habermas's distinction between strategic and communicative action is an attempt to safeguard the public against ideology - where ideology is defined as the conditions which distort non-coercive ideal speech. But communicative action/public judgement loses its power to enlighten to the extent that it extracts people from their historical settings. Besides, disagreement is also a fundamental value of democratic life, and strategic action can be fully justified when confronted by interests of domination. I am not suggesting that public journalism, or its practitioners, are innately sexist or oppressive, only that its conception of the public is not particularly sensitive to the inherent power relationships that are a part of late capitalist society. It is this last point that I wish to turn to in the final section of the chapter.

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An excellent investigation into how reason is historically situated is found in: Medick, Hans (1982). "Plebeian Culture in the Transition to Capitalism," Culture, Ideology and Politics, Eds. Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones, London, Routledge. Medic explains how the often debauched plebeian culture of 18th century London had its own rationality. "This behaviour, so negatively represented by upper and middle-class critics, in fact shows its own rationality and positive consequences. By no means irrational, it is simply the expression of preferences and priorities which were profoundly different from those which the moralising, mercantilist advocates of thrift and industry sought to impose. ... Money income, therefore, found its most 'rational' use in its relatively short-term conversion into the currency of socio-cultural production" (Medic 1982: 90-91).

The Market and Public Journalism

I have mentioned the phrase *as if* a number of times throughout the chapter. I argued that Habermas views subjects *as if* they are already communicatively competent; that the theory of communicative action/public judgement views discursive partners *as if* they wish to achieve an open consensus; that communicative action/public judgement proceeds *as if* consensus is possible; and, that Nancy Fraser suggests the liberal public sphere, predicated as it is on abstract reason, proceeds *as if* all status differences between people are bracketed. This cadence is not by chance. In fact it reflects an integral part of public journalism.

Rosen tells us that "making journalism more public means getting journalists to adopt better 'as if' strategies, where 'better' means more attuned to the requirements of public discussion in a democracy" (Rosen 1991: 281). Rosen admits that political reporters face staged events on a daily basis. The art of political manipulation has become a standard part of the political landscape. It hit its low point, he suggests, during the 1988 U.S. presidential election. But, he says, because reporters in their role as objective distributers of information "proceed *as if* they are not going to meet with staged and manipulative events ... campaign journalism is emptied of its public function" (Rosen 1991: 281). What results is a staged spectacle which drives home the already well developed cynicism of reporters. Rosen's *as if* strategy asks journalists "to talk public journalism into existence" (Rosen 1994b). By writing and talking as if the premise is true Rosen hopes to encourage others to practice experiments such as the one conducted in 1992 by the *Charlotte*

Observer.[13]

I believe public journalism, as a philosophy, does not progress much beyond talk.

Public journalism acknowledges that contemporary journalism is preoccupied with the

coverage of strategy, and political manipulation, but its main response, in practical terms,

is to ignore the reasons why that is the case. Rosen and Merritt cull ideas from Dewey and

Habermas too selectively, and as a result they downplay one of Dewey and Habermas's key

concerns: that *money and power distort public life*. The goals of public journalism are

presented *as if* they are compatible with the market. *That is the problem of public*

journalism.

Rosen and Merritt remain true to the spirit of Dewey to the extent that they argue for a

revitalized public through improved public discourse. But they seem to have failed to

remember that Dewey also said that:

> As long as interests of pecuniary profit are powerful, and a public has not located
> and identified itself, those who have this interest will have an unresisted motive for
> tampering with [public opinion]. ... Just as in the conduct of industry and exchange

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13

There is now evidence that the public journalism model has immigrated to Canada. CBC
TV in Edmonton teamed up with the Calgary Herald and the Edmonton Sun to run a series
of stories with public forums designed to give Albertans "a more representative picture of
how their lives were changing - for better or worse" (McKie 1995: 11). The TV reports
were grouped under the title "Eyes on Alberta." The Vancouver Sun has also taken steps
towards the use of public journalism. In its coverage of the 1996 provincial election in
British Columbia, the Sun published a list of six major issues, including: law and order,
health and education. The paper then asked its readers to rank the issues in order of
importance. The Sun framed the initiative as a chance for members of the public to voice
their opinions in the face of political strategists determined to sway voters with
promotional slogans (Hume 1996). During the same election, two of the main television
stations in B.C. also took up some of the ideas of public journalism. Both BCTV and the
Vancouver CBC affiliate asked political candidates to answer questions solicited from the
public.

generally the technological factor is obscured, deflected and defeated by "business," so specifically in the management of publicity. The gathering and sale of subject matter having a public import is part of the existing pecuniary system. (Dewey 1927: 182)

As for Habermas, he announced his lack of faith in the commercial news media in his first book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989). Habermas saw the "refeudalization" of the public sphere as a process of decline, due largely to the commercialization of the press and the influx of advertising and publicity interests into the public sphere. These commercial interests, he argues, transformed the critical potential of a debating public. The public sphere became "the court *before*" which one's public prestige could be "displayed - rather than *in* which public critical debate is carried on" (Habermas 1989: 201). Critically argued consensus is replaced by competition between "privileged private interests" (Habermas 1989: 195). Habermas appears to have lost hope in reforming the commercial media:

> The disintegration of the electorate as a public becomes manifest with the realization that press and radio, 'deployed in the usual manner,' have practically no effect; within the framework of the manufactured public sphere the mass media are useful only as vehicles of advertising. The parties address themselves to the 'people,' de facto to that minority whose state of mind is symptomatically revealed, according to survey researchers, in terms of an average vocabulary of five hundred words. (Habermas 1989: 217)

Democratization, he says, must be carried out elsewhere. Political parties and institutions that constitute the welfare state must be reformed from within using the principles of critical publicity oriented toward consensus (Habermas 1989: 209). Democratization in the media, he says, is unlikely as long as they are organized by commercial interests.

> When the laws of the market governing the sphere of commodity exchange and of social labor also pervaded the sphere reserved for private people as a public, rational-critical debate had a tendency to be replaced by consumption, and the web

71

of public communication unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode. (Habermas 1989: 161)

Nevertheless, Rosen, while acknowledging Habermas's pessimism in this regard, insists that "corporate" and "public cultures" can live together (Rosen 1991: 273). Without providing a detailed argument, Rosen says that "it is far from obvious that the evisceration of public life is a welcome prospect for all media owners" (Rosen 1991: 273). Merritt goes as far as to say "the two roles - reviving public life while dealing with the realities of the popular marketplace - coexist in public journalism because they need not be mutually exclusive" (Merritt 1994: 25). Merritt suggests that as long as the "core concerns" of public journalism are sufficiently guarded in the editorial section of newspapers, the rest of the paper can be left to publish its traditional mix of entertainment and leisure sections (Merritt (1994: 26). Public journalism is compatible with the financial interests of media organizations, Rosen says, because it can be used to attract readers and viewers. He cites a lecture given by James K. Batten, the chief executive officer the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, in which Batten notes an in-house study that argues sagging readership may rise if the public feels connected to their community (Rosen 1991: 273). Rosen asserts that the values of public journalism can be sold to publishers because journalism has a core need to legitimate itself in the eyes of the public (Rosen 1991: 274; Hallin 1985: 139). Finally, Rosen says that ...

> How the corporate culture of a media company may become more public is a question that will interest us only if we *assume* that corporations are, indeed, cultures, and not profit centers alone. That we should be willing to entertain this assumption is part of what I mean by adopting a "more public" perspective in communication studies. (Rosen 1991: 274) (emphasis added)

Rosen asks public journalists to act *as if* corporate and public cultures can coexist.

72

Journalism's public functions can be enlarged, says Rosen, through contacts with organizations which foster public values. He cites the Kettering Foundation as one example; the foundation is a non-partisan organization dedicated to promoting participatory politics.[14] Rosen suggests that the support of the Kettering Foundation helped Jack Swift, the executive editor of the Columbus (Georgia) *Ledger-Enquirer*, with his paper's public journalism experiment, in 1987. The paper commissioned a poll to find out what local citizens thought were the most important problems facing the city and then sponsored a town hall meeting to encourage public discussion on those issues. Rosen suggests that Swift was able develop the project, entitled *United Beyond 2000*, because of the supportive culture that existed within the Knight-Ridder newspaper chain, to which the *Ledger-Enquirer* belongs. The project, Rosen insists, was not an exercise in self-promotion; it was the outcome of a broad coalition of interested civic organizations, and well connected individuals united in their desire to talk about their common problems (Rosen 1991: 270-274).

Rosen cautions against allowing journalism to "degenerate into either self-promotion or civic boosterism" (Rosen 1994: 14). Public journalism, he says, requires a "delicate touch" and must not be allowed to fall into the trap of advocating one position over another (Rosen 1994: 14). But, despite the warning, there are journalists who do not share Rosen and Merritt's optimism. The question being asked by many is whether public

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14

The Kettering Foundation is a major contributor to the Project on Public Life and the Press. The project, which Rosen heads as director, publicizes public journalism and holds professional development conferences for interested journalists.

journalism could be used as a "glorified marketing tool" (McKie 1995; Woo 1995). I believe their concern is justified.

I have argued that public journalism seeks to make a break from the narrow limitations of so-called objective journalism. Public journalism is an attempt to shift from an "information" model of communication to a "conversational" model. It is an attempt to modify the code of objectivity and replace it with a new code which celebrates public discussion and deliberation. Rosen and Merritt assume corporate cultures can be made more public by modifying the code of objectivity with the principles of public journalism. The difficulty is that public journalism does little more than propose a new paradigm without examining the historical roots of the old system it wishes to replace. Replacing or modifying news objectivity will not, in itself, solve the problems of public life. News objectivity is, in part, a creation of the market; and as such, it carries with it the market's logic - a logic which I believe works against public life.

CHAPTER FOUR

OBJECTIVITY, THE MARKET AND PUBLIC JOURNALISM

Public journalism suggests that democratic life - defined as the process of deciding things together - is in crisis and that journalism must accept partial responsibility for correcting the problem. Journalism, it is argued, is hobbled by a reliance on political and professional elite sources. News discourse is filled with the strategies and alliances of these "inside players," resulting in the exclusion of the public; not recognizing itself in the daily barrage of media messages, the public becomes politically apathetic. Public journalism, in an attempt to rectify the problem, suggests that journalists help politicize the public by fostering a rational discussion about public life modelled roughly on the pragmatic communicative theories of John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas. I also suggested that public journalism contains a problematic assumption: that its goals are still compatible with those of the commercially run media industry.

Public journalism assumes that blockages to democratic consensus are simply procedural or communicative - what is needed is a better way of communicating among members of the public about the pragmatic problems of public life, their consequences and potential solutions to those problems. Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt focus on the professional norm of objectivity; they suggest that the tenets of the code be rethought so that the purpose of journalism becomes the establishment of democratic communication between citizens and not simply the delivery of so-called "fair" or "unbiased" information to media audiences, who, by virtue of their position as consumers are relegated to the role

75

of spectators. I have argued that the difficulty with this analysis is that public journalism ignores the literature suggesting that the logic of capital is itself at odds with democratic media. Public journalism does not account for the possibility that structural blockages to democratic life may exist; in fact, it rejects the idea that public and corporate cultures are irreconcilable.

In this chapter, I will examine the historical roots of news objectivity; I will suggest that any attempt to modify the norm which does not take into account its historical and social context within an industry driven by profit would detract from public journalism's stated goals: open, non-coercive communication between equal partners with an aim toward resolution. I will first describe the historical origins of news objectivity; following that I will describe some of the structural impediments to democratic life associated with the commercial media; and, finally, I will explore the viability of the goals of public journalism within the context of the market.

Historical Origins of Objectivity

The press in England and North America were originally government owned; the official gazettes, as they were known in Canada, served as organs of official policy. The gazettes announced court dates and ship arrivals, and published edicts and laws, but refrained from direct editorial comment. Eventually, with urbanization, growing literacy rates and improved technology, privately owned news publications began to appear; but these publications remained partisan voices which owed their existence to political

patronage. It was not until the 1830s with the beginnings of the penny press that the highly partisan nature of the press began to change, and where we see the beginnings of objectivity as a professional norm (Taras 1990: 41-53).

Zhao Yuezhi divides explanations of the historical origins of news objectivity into three categories: 1. the rise of democratic market society, 2. technology, and, 3. social relations (Zhao 1989: 35-52). The first explanation comes from Michael Schudson (1978) who argues that the journalistic "belief in facts" which began to take hold in the 1830s was a product of the social and economic changes which were occurring at the time; he calls these changes the "rise of the democratic market society." But, Schudson argues, it was not until the upheaval of the First World War, and the government propaganda campaigns which accompanied it, that objectivity became a professional norm. The discrepancy between the horrors of the war and government-led misinformation campaigns proved to be immense. The naive acceptance of facts was discarded and replaced with the rules and procedures of professional journalistic objectivity. Schudson's account is widely accepted, but, says Zhao, it fails to account for the organizational context in which journalists operated (Zhao 1989: 35-38).

Part of the context for journalism during that time was the development of rapid technological change. The invention of the telegraph, it is argued, led to the creation of cooperative news agencies, such as the Associated Press, which, according to James Carey "led to a fundamental change in news. It snapped the tradition of partisan journalism by forcing the wire services to generate 'objective' news that papers of any political stripe could use" (Carey 1987: 13). Zhao cautions us against embracing this view. She argues

that the telegraph, while having an enormous impact, is not *the* causal factor in the

adoption of objectivity. Zhao points out that the "Associated Press was established in

1848, after the penny press had proved itself and articulated its non-partisan stand" (Zhao

1989: 44). The mass commercial press could not afford to alienate their large, diverse

and, one must add, affluent audiences. News organizations needed a method of

legitimising themselves and the answer was found in the professional code of objectivity

(Hallin 1985; Osler 1993).

Finally, Dan Schiller (1981, cited in Zhao) insists that objectivity can only be

understood if one first understands the social relations behind its adoption. Schiller argues

that objectivity "mystifies" the relationship between the interests of the working class and

the commercial interests of the penny press; he sees the development of objectivity as a

case of appropriation. The penny press, he says, using narratives of crime and corruption,

appropriated the ideals of the labour press, which had appealed to enlightenment notions

of reason and justice, without revealing its own self-interests - the sale of a profit driven

publication to a mass audience (Zhao 1989: 47-53).

What all three of these categories (the rise of the democratic market society,

technology, and social relations) have in common is the idea that, through objectivity, the

press claimed to "speak from a universal perspective." Zhao goes on to suggest that this

universal perspective is itself a product of both economic and cultural/political imperatives.

Objectivity provided a method for the commercial press to appeal to its audience,

conceived as unified consumers, on an egalitarian footing while at the same time ensuring

the public of the media's political legitimacy (Zhao 1989: 53).

Viewed in the context of the above critiques, objectivity has more to do with economics and technology than it does with any adherence to liberal philosophy (Osler 1993: 92). How, one might ask, can public journalism exchange its model of journalism for that of objectivity if it does not address the foundation upon which the old model is built? Public journalism offers a new type of editorial content that promises to engage the public as a community of inquirers. But Rosen and Merritt suggest that the code of journalistic objectivity can be modified without analyzing the nature of journalism's relationship to the market. Michael Schudson, while not referring to objectivity, explains the difficulties facing community life with regards to commercial media:

> [T]he commercial model of journalism that dominates general, public discourse today and grew out of the penny press of the 1830s seeks a market, not an association or a community. ... This market ideal of the new journalism is the antithesis of association or community." (Schudson 1992: 153)

The market addresses a mass audience conceived, not as citizens sharing collective ideals and pragmatic interests, but as the sum of its individual parts. The consumer is assumed to be autonomous in his/her wants and needs; the market is viewed as a benign distributive mechanism used by individuals who are capable of making rational choices in isolation. The unifying principle of the public for commercial media is consumption, not intersubjective reason (Chapter Two).

I agree with Rosen and Merritt that the code of objectivity, as practiced, is hostile to shared experience and collective inquiry; it may reduce the world to a collection of facts which are then presented to the public by a trained elite, but it is the market which first demanded that it be so, not journalists. Seen in this light, Lippmann's critique of public opinion (Chapter Three) simply provides a justification and rationalization for market

forces. The public - the god term of journalism - may be dead, but the primary

responsibility for that death lies with the market.

Market forces and Other Structural Determinants of Journalism

A lot of critical research has been conducted into how the market opposed the

development of democratic media; much of the work has centred on how the drive for

profits leads to the pursuit of the lowest common denominator and sensational reporting.

William Hoynes (1994) believes the research can be divided into four general areas:

concentration of ownership, the growth of corporate connections with non-media

companies (conglomeration), the rise of global media empires and the effects of

advertising. I will briefly discuss these categories before turning to a more focused inquiry

into how these structural determinants affect the goals of public journalism.

Perhaps the best known discussion of corporate concentration is provided by Ben

Bagdikian (1992), a former award winning journalist. He argues that public information

has become an "industrial by-product" of a "private ministry of information." In the fourth

edition of his book, *The Media Monopoly*, Bagdikian reports that at the end of the Second

World War most daily newspapers in the United States (80 per cent) were independently

owned; by 1989, he says, that ratio had been reversed. The majority of media businesses

in the United States, at the time of publication, were controlled by 23 large corporations

(Bagdikian 1992: 4). In Canada, the situation is even more drastic; most English language

daily newspapers are controlled by four media chains: Hollinger, Southam, Thomson, and

Torstar, with the majority of those controlled by giants Hollinger and Southam. Hollinger is now on top of the Canadian media hierarchy after it purchased a controlling interest in Southam.

Bagdikian argues that media corporations fight, and sometimes collude with each other, to establish market dominance so they can squeeze higher than average profit margins from their organizations, resulting in a predictable decline in the quality of journalism. More than that, he says, corporate concentration has a dire effect on democracy by decreasing the free flow of diverse information. There is no conspiracy but that does not mean that corporations do not act alike. "They have shared values. Those values are reflected in the emphasis in the news and popular culture. They are the primary shapers of American public opinion about events and their meaning" (Bagdikian 1992: 9).

Media conglomeration - the extension of media holdings into non-media sectors of the economy - is also said to be a major structural deterrent against the democratization of the media. Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that the massive corporate strength of conglomerates blocks the entry of competition into the media marketplace. Vast resources are required to meet the startup costs of broadcasting and newspaper ventures, resources that only corporate giants possess. A diverse cross-section of non-corporate interests are, therefore, necessarily excluded from participation in mass media production.

As well, the Thomson newspaper chain is known to have extensive interests in real estate, oil and gas and financial institutions. The fear is that these various interests could leech into the editorial content of Thomson's newspapers.

The logic of capital accumulation operating through the creation of conglomerates and

81

cross media ownership is now at work on a global scale. Media companies are so large that they have newspaper, publishing, broadcasting, movie and video production holdings all over the world. The same products and images can be sold, repackaged and resold many times over. Following Bagdikian, Hoynes suggests that, "the various components of the media empires are used to promote each other and sell affiliated products" (Hoynes 1994: 30). He uses the example of the motion picture Batman. Citing Marc Crispin Miller (1990), Hoynes argues that the Time-Warner film was promoted by other company holdings (*Time* magazine) not only to increase the film's popularity but to further promote the many associated Batman products, t-shirts, etc. In the global logic of production, marketability becomes the primary concern of production (Hoynes 1994: 31).

The issue of corporate ownership is obviously a serious concern and is an obstacle to the diversity of opinion required for public journalism to function. Nevertheless, Robert Hackett reminds us that we should not read the literature on the political economy of news as an indictment of the public. Audiences are not "dupes" to be manipulated at will by interested corporations. Such an assumption overlooks the "possibilities for audience resistance." It also implies "contempt towards 'the masses' and 'their' popular cultural forms" (Hackett 1988: 88). Hackett also advises against embracing an instrumentalist position. Radical instrumentalism, he says, is "the view that social and cultural institutions are the instruments of those who occupy elite decision-making positions ... and who manipulate them in their own narrow interests" (Hackett 1988: 84). The radical instrumentalist view is often referred to dismissively by liberal and neo-conservative critics as conspiracy theory; and, as a critique of media capital it is limited. As Hackett says, if

corporate elite ownership was the sole factor determining media content how can one account for the existence, however rare, of anti-business stories. Corporate ownership is important, he says, because it ties the media "into the logic of capital accumulation, commodification, and production for a market;" (Hackett 1988: 94) the strongest link between the news media and this logic is, according to Hackett, commercial advertising, and for that reason it deserves special attention.

Bagdikian (1992) and Herman and Chomsky (1988) argue that advertiser driven media are not interested in the public in the broad sense of the term used by Rosen and Merritt. Commercial media focus on attracting affluent audiences, not citizens. Bagdikian quotes statistics referring to the median combined income of American families, a level of income which he suggests is so low that it is "undesirable for major media." He goes on to say that, in 1984 75 per cent of black families and 67 per cent of Hispanic families were below the median income; thus, the "unwanted American population" - those people considered to be less desirable by advertisers - includes a disproportionate number of minority groups (Bagdikian 1992: 199-200). It is not surprising that tips regarding low-cost housing for minority groups are nowhere to be seen in the "New Homes" section of most U.S. dailies.

The dynamic is best illustrated by Dallas Smythe (1981) who submits that the principle product of the media is not information, but audiences who are sold as objects to advertisers. Viewed in this manner, the audience becomes a commodity (Smythe 1981: 23; cited in Hackett 1988: 89). Recognizing audiences as commodities provides a fundamentally different starting point than the one taken by public journalism. In the first chapter, I explained how Rosen believed that "changes to the broader culture" were

83

undermining public life. His response is to change the way in which journalism speaks to the public. However, viewing the audience as commodity illuminates the ways in which the market provides systemic blockages to democratic communication which are not linked to the broader cultural changes referred to by Rosen. The following explanation of the relevance of Smythe's ideas to public journalism is guided by an analysis provided by Hackett (1988).

First, advertiser preference for affluent audiences provides systemic pressures creating a form of political censorship which works against radical newspapers. A strong case is made for this argument in James Curran's (1978) study of the British press in the 19th century. The cost of establishing and running newspapers rose substantially during the latter part of the century due to changing technology, increased circulation and distribution costs and a drop in newsstand prices. At the same time, a growing market was developing for consumer goods. The combination of the two trends led newspapers to shift their source of revenue from circulation to advertising. Because wealthy readers were more valuable than poor ones, conservative papers, oriented to the interests of the former, could charge higher rates for advertising than could the labour press. The cost and revenue squeeze eventually eliminated the once thriving labour newspapers. As Hackett puts it, "affluent readers have ... a disproportionate 'vote' in determining the type of media that survive" (Hackett 1988: 90).

Second, Smythe redefines media content. He views the traditional editorial content of news media as little more than a "free lunch" designed to attract audiences. Defined in this way, news stories cannot be completely separated from advertisements. The editorial

84

product, just like advertising, must attract and hold on to audiences. But Smythe suggests

the commercial media do more than deliver affluent audiences to advertisers, they also try

to shape their mood (Hackett 1988: 91). As Sut Jhally explains, "programs not only have

to deliver large numbers of the 'correct' type of people to advertisers, but they have to

deliver them in the right 'frame of mind.' Programs should be designed to enhance the

effectiveness of the ads that are placed within them" (Jhally 1989: 76; cited in Hoynes

1995). In news discourse, Hackett argues, the audience is often interpellated as consumers

and taxpayers, but rarely as workers. Strikes are often made sense of by using the

narrative of consumer inconvenience and lost production (Hackett 1988: 91).

> Ultimately, the most fundamental ideological constraint on news which is produced
> within commercial mass media may well be the necessity of telling stories in a way
> which attracts an audience prepared to adopt a consumerist lifestyle. And this
> imperative affects all media faced with the necessity of selling audiences, regardless
> of the character of ownership - chain or independent, locally-owned or
> conglomerate, and private or State. (Hackett 1988: 91)

The promotional aspect of public life is taken a step further by Andrew Wernick

(1991). Wernick has extended the critical analysis of marketing to include a range of

cultural, economic and political domains. Wernick suggests that cultural products,

including journalism, serve at once to produce an interwoven set of "promotional" and

"non-promotional" messages. "In the organs of print and broadcasting, information and

entertainment are the flowers which attract the bee. In this sense, too, the non-advertising

content of such media can be considered, even semiotically, as an extension of their ads"

(Wernick 1991: 182).

The above argument is of particular importance for a critique of public journalism.

One will recall that an important goal of public journalism is to reduce the level of apathy

towards public life; Rosen and Merritt argue that journalism can become meaningful for the public if people are asked to participate as citizens in a rational discussion about the consequences of public policy initiatives. Public journalism distances itself from target marketing techniques, such as surveys, designed to pinpoint what readers want to see in a news broadcast or newspaper. These types of solutions to the crisis of declining circulation and ratings are attempts to measure public opinion, not improve it. Rosen and Merritt want to raise circulation and ratings, but they want to accomplish this by improving civic dialogue, not simply delivering repackaged information. Unfortunately, public journalism fails to address the mechanism which defines the media's relationship to the public: the market.

Open, participatory and non-strategic/non-coercive public communication is fundamentally at odds with the logic of the market. The public is fragmented and alienated, and journalism must accept its share of responsibility for this state of affairs, but it will never accomplish its goals if it does not disengage itself from a market logic which encourages a culture of isolated consumers whose only connection to each other is found via consumer preference and brand name identification. As Hackett makes clear, even publicly owned broadcasters like the CBC, at least with regards to television programming, which is partly dependent on advertising revenue, are affected by the need to attract particular audiences.

Rosen and Merritt suggest that news organizations could, among other measures, sponsor or organize public forums. On the surface it would seem to be a relatively benign idea which could, one hopes, lead to some sort of meaningful participation on the part of the public. However, when considered in the context of the above discussion the suggestion becomes complex and problematic. If public discussions are entered into without an understanding of how market forces affect or structure those discussions the potential for failure is great.

Insight into this dynamic is provided by John Phelan (1991). The threat to publicly oriented journalism (organized ostensibly for non-profit purposes) posed by promotional imperatives is examined by Phelan in his study of public service campaigns. Federal regulations in both Canada and the United States specify that part of the mandate of broadcasters is to serve their local communities. The obligation is usually met by sponsoring special events or charity functions. Phelan suggests this obligation is often used as a way of identifying the station as a concerned member of the community. The promotional goal should not be underestimated. Competition among media organizations is fierce. Technology has made it much easier for large mega-stations to beam their programming into smaller markets, and with a push to increase profit margins station differentiation becomes a crucial part of a company's strategy to maintain and increase

market share. [15]

Public service campaigns can also be developed within the format of the newscast. News features at the local level (and increasingly at the national level) often take the form of interviews or profiles of community members. Phelan suggests that these stories are typically treated as "soft" features which, despite the potential for conflict when dealing with subject matter such as crime or drug abuse, are usually packaged so as "to preserve an atmosphere of upbeat optimism" (Phelan 1991: 79).

> Flowing from a creative transformation of an alleged weakness into a strength, the public or community service campaign manages to mobilize all the strategies local stations have mustered to meet their obligations to owners, advertisers, viewers, government and, of course, the local community in one policy gesture. (Phelan 1991: 80)

It must be said that public journalism does diverge from public service campaigns on two very important points: 1. public journalism wishes to *create* a public while public service campaigns only seek to *inform* it, and, 2. public service campaigns are often overtly promotional, whereas, public journalism, as defined by Rosen and Merritt, is not intended to be promotional in the narrow sense of that term. Public journalism is designed to make public life go well. But the market logic which threatens the public benefit of public service campaigns also is at work in public journalism. Rosen may state his distaste for this type of fuzzy community event in unequivocal terms, but ultimately all he offers as a way of forestalling such promotional games is the professional news judgement of

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15

The threat of outside competition due to improvements in technology is not limited to broadcasting. Efficiencies provided by high-speed computer links have allowed *The Globe and Mail* newspaper to print editions containing regional news in different markets across Canada.

competent editors dedicated to the goals of public journalism.

Public forums are usually pitched as community gatherings which include business representatives as well as average citizens. This grouping of interests worries William Woo, the editor of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, who asks, "When the lion lies down with the lamb, when the editor and the real estate broker and the banker and the elected official form a team, whose ethics, whose culture prevails" (Woo 1995: 19)? The question is dismissed by Rosen. He calls it "inflammatory, and almost entirely without factual basis." Rosen's dismissal is revealing. He says that Woo would be "hard pressed" to find editors with "visible ties to public journalism" who actively promote one position over another (Rosen 1995a). Rosen's reply assumes that Woo's question only makes sense within the context of a traditional understanding of objectivity or a mere instrumentalist critique of the political economy of journalism. Rosen presumes that Woo's critique misunderstands public journalism's entry into public debate. The aim, says Rosen, is not to take sides, but to create a debating public.

My argument, however, relies on neither an uncritical interpretation of news objectivity nor on radical instrumentalism for support. In Chapter Three, I discussed how public communication between people with differing status, economic and educational resources is problematic. Not only does public journalism's *as if* strategy downplay these differences by first conceiving of participants as abstract reasoning subjects, but it overlooks the fact that the discussion is embedded within the logic of the marketplace. When the public forum is reproduced as a media product the participants are themselves situated within editorial content that is used to attract audiences. What is conceived as a discussion

guided by the rules of public judgement or communicative action has been transformed into a cultural product that simultaneously carries a promotional and non-promotional message. The promotional imperative is embedded in the news discourse of any news media that rely upon advertiser support. These media are, therefore, fundamentally predisposed toward: 1. a particular type of affluent audience, and, 2. a form of presentation designed to prepare audiences for the all important message, the advertisement.

Anecdotal evidence in support of the above argument is found at Merritt's own paper, the *Wichita Eagle*. Mike Hoyt interviewed reporters at the paper, some of whom associate public journalism with, what they refer to as, "a recent softness at the paper" (Hoyt 1995: 32).

> 'We had a zoo animal on the front page every week for six or eight weeks,' says one reporter, 'It was fucking embarrassing.'
> 'Now that Buzz (Merritt, who had been on sabbatical) is back, things are getting better,' that reporter continues. 'But I think this is something they are wrestling with - how do you balance public journalism, *whatever* it is, with the inevitable circulation concerns: they worry about pissing people off, that we're negative media, and blah blah blah.' (Hoyt 1995: 32)

The above anecdote could be interpreted as the result of the *Eagle* temporarily losing its public journalism champion. And while it is true that not all reporters are unhappy there is more evidence that has critics of public journalism worried. According to Hoyt, another prominent example is the case of former reporter Judy Thomas. Thomas has been nominated twice by the *Eagle* for her work on abortion protests, as well as for her work on the trial of an abortion protester who pleaded guilty to setting fires at six abortion clinics in Kansas. Hoyt reports that:

That kind of coverage of the anti-abortion movement, according to reporters and others, brought complaints from a number of readers in the heart of Bible-belt Kansas. Last year, (1994) Thomas began to feel that her digging into controversial subjects was no longer a priority. Some reporters worried that the reason was public journalism, or at least Dill's (Sheri Dill, the *Eagle*'s executive editor) interpretation of it, a sense that the need to connect with readers had become bound up with the fear of offending them. (Hoyt 1995: 32)

Empirical evidence is lacking; nevertheless, apprehension seems justified. The potential for the hypothetical forum I have been discussing to degenerate into a "feel-good" session is, I believe, very real. After all, profit seeking newspapers and broadcasters do not want to alienate their audiences. A public discussion about chronic unemployment involving community leaders, union representatives as well as average citizens could, on the one hand, contain content regarding the structural reasons for high levels of joblessness (non-promotional message); but it could also, depending on how the forum is presented, turn into an event in which community leaders reassure each other, and the audience, about the benefits of further group effort and discussion without addressing the contradictory interests at play among community members (promotional message on behalf of advertisers). Coming to public judgement assumes that differing material interests are debated and judged with reference to a range of validity claims. Yet, critically assessing stereotypical narratives such as the "welfare bum," or anti-consumerist messages, is not always conducive to a buying mood. Such discussions require that deeply held beliefs be challenged and in some cases shown to be inferior. Public judgement, a process that aligns truth with openly achieved consensus, is itself commodified. *Truth is whatever groups of people of differing social status negotiate within a discourse constrained by the logic of the market.*

91

It is interesting to note that many of the papers that have experimented with public journalism, including its two most high-profile advocates the *Charlotte Observer* and the *Wichita Eagle,* are owned by the Gannett and Knight-Ridder newspaper chains. (The *Observer* and the *Eagle* are both owned by Gannett) Gannett and Knight-Ridder own the *Detroit News* and the *Detroit Free Press* respectively. Both papers (at the time this thesis was being written) are currently embroiled in a protracted labour dispute. According to *The Detroit Union,* a paper published by striking workers at both dailies, the companies "made a combined record $636 million in profits in 1994" (Schellman 1995). These record profits come at a time when the companies are "demanding more than $30 million in givebacks from workers in Detroit" (Schellman 1995). They are also busy acquiring new properties. Gannett is said to have made a "$1.7 billion dollar purchase of MultiMedia while Knight-Ridder paid $360 million for a string of Bay Area newspapers" (Schellman 1995). Confronted with such evidence it becomes harder to have faith in Rosen's claim that corporate and public cultures can coexist. The example feeds perfectly into Bagdikian's thesis, and others, (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Winter 1994, Murdock 1982) that media conglomerates pursue profits at the expense of editorial quality, regardless of how that quality is defined and legitimated. An example of corporate indifference toward editorial quality is available in the Canadian context. Hollinger, in an exercise that became known in newspaper circles as "drowning the kittens," fired 173 employees shortly after it bought out the family run Saskatoon StarPhoenix and Regina Leader-Post. Objectivity and public judgement are equally available as tools of news production and marketing.

In addition, the board of directors of both Gannett and Knight-Ridder, the two largest

newspaper organizations in the United States, include many directors who share interlocking appointments on a number of major corporations. While the number of interlocking directorships at Gannett has decreased since 1979 the same cannot be said for Knight-Ridder; that company's interlocking directorships jumped from 15 to 28 from 1979 to 1995 (McMillan et al. 1996: 9). Eleven of those corporate affiliations are with companies which rank among the "200 largest institutions in the United States as of 1994" (McMillan et al. 1996: 9). The connection between public journalism and the corporate world is quite strong.

Finally, while public journalism misunderstands how market forces conceive and position the public within news discourse, it also seriously underestimates the power of elite groups and institutions to control the public agenda. Rosen's example of an alternative narrative during the Persian Gulf War is a case in point. Not only did the U.S. military have enormous resources devoted to their promotional campaign, but it had one other major advantage that was even more important - journalists desperately needed the information being offered by military briefers. The gaping maw that is the news hole must be filled on a daily (hourly in the case of radio) basis. Because of this overriding need journalists require quick, reliable and inexpensive sources of information. As Herman and Chomsky explain: "the mass media are drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and reciprocity of interest" (Herman and Chomsky 1988: 18). Elite sources usually, as in the case of the U.S. military, represent organizations that produce usable information on a regular basis. Rosen's suggested narrative of the "just war" is in fact an important story that would be open to public

participation. The difficulty is that relying on the public is inefficient. Even if one accepts

the argument that the process of public judgement represents a new form of legitimation

that can replace objectivity, the public cannot compete with the efficiency of official

sources. There lies the problem. Choosing sources is not only a question of legitimacy, it

is one of efficient production. [16]

Journalism's reliance on officials sources is not, in itself, a consequence of the market.

The symbiotic relationship between officials sources and journalists developed, in part,

because both partners needed each other in order to reach the public. But the relationship

does work in tandem with the market. If audiences are the principle product of media, as I

have argued, official sources help news organizations legitimate the bait used to entice

those audiences.

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For an exhaustive discussion of the production of U.S. public opinion during the Gulf War
see Chapters Eight, Nine, and Ten of: Bennett, W. Lance and Paletz, David L. Eds.
(1994). Taken By Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf
War, Chicago, University of Chicago Press. Also see: Kellner, Douglas (1992). The
Persian Gulf TV War, Boulder, Westview Press.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

I began this study by discussing a sense of alienation that has gripped the North

American public. People's faith in government and other public institutions is fading.

Journalism, as one of the most important public institutions, has suffered greatly from this

trend; newspaper circulation is down while ratings for the flagship newscasts of the three

major U.S. television networks are being squeezed by a myriad of entertainment programs

offered by cable competitors. Journalism simply isn't respected as much as it used to be.

That is not to lament a lost golden era of journalism that, I would be the first to admit,

never existed; it is to say that journalism has drifted from its public purpose and has lost its

relevance to society. Forces of enormous power are remaking Western society:

globalization, economic restructuring, the resurgence of nationalism, technological

innovation, to name a few. But while these changes are named by the media they are

rarely, if ever, explained. References to these trends are incorporated into news stories,

politicians *display* their concern, but these narratives appear to take place in what, for

many, has become a surreal environment that is offset from the day to day concerns of

average citizens. Government pronouncements are made and are duly reported; journalists

then rush off to capture the predictable denunciations from the political opposition. The

analysis that is provided tallies the score: who is up, who is down, who is winning the

battle of appearances in the political arena. The language of public life has been divorced

from the interests of citizens; it does not refer to practical problems and their

consequences, but, instead, reflects the promotional culture that has become an integral part of politics. Citizens, unable to see their lives reflected in the journalism they read and watch, reject public life, and, by extension, themselves; for what is public life if not the involvement of citizens in issues which are held in common.

The real deliberations of political importance, those which pertain to fundamental norms, values and interests, are conducted out of the public eye by a professional elite whose decisions are latter submitted to the public for approval. Public opinion is solicited, but such surveys are used to gauge the mood and temperament of people so as to improve the effectiveness of the political pitch. This style of politics is often referred to as elite accommodation or corporatism. Politics becomes the successful management and control of resources and issues guided by the insight of technical managers, not practical needs as defined by the public. Such a situation, where the public is not fully engaged and aware of political life, reflects what polemicist John Ralston Saul (1995) calls an "unconscious civilization."

Journalism, as the main conduit of public communication, must assume its share of blame for this state of affairs. The main tactic used by journalists to counter the professionalization of political communication and the promotional games that came with it has been to share with their readers/viewers how political messages and the media events that surround them are constructed. But, as I suggested in Chapter Three, this type of reporting provides little more than a cynical postmodern wink, allowing people to feel that they really do understand the "political game," while remaining excluded from participation.

Public journalism's answer to the problem of journalistic legitimacy is to modify the journalistic code of objectivity. Jay Rosen and Davis Merritt suggest that legitimacy should rest with journalism's contribution to the public good, not with the non-partisan presentation of authoritative expert sources. Drawing upon the work of Jürgen Habermas and John Dewey, public journalism sets itself the goal of developing what Daniel Yankelovich calls "public judgement." Through the process of public judgement, the public is encouraged to view themselves, not as passive spectators, but, as active citizens who have a stake in their community. Rosen and Merritt want journalists to break their reliance on politicians, experts and institutional sources so as to make room for the concerns and aspirations of the public. The only caveat, says Rosen, is that any changes to the practice of journalism would have to be incremental in scope. Editors are conservative creatures who enjoy the rhythm and daily habits of the newsroom. They cannot be expected to change their spots overnight, nor does Rosen expect them to.

Public journalism makes an important contribution to journalism criticism. Most importantly, it addresses what Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1995) call the "crisis of public communication." They name five components of the crisis, each of which is addressed by public journalism (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995: 213-214).

First, public journalism recognizes that journalism's reliance on objectivity has depoliticized the craft. The need to appear non-partisan has helped push journalism toward a focus on personalities and the strategic significance of events to the exclusion of the values and norms that underlie different policies.

Second, public journalism tries to cleanse the language of journalism of its overt

cynicism. It suggests that the routine description of political manipulation has contributed to the widespread alienation felt by the public. Such routine descriptions encourage a simplified portrait of all politicians as purely self-serving and corrupt.

Third, Rosen and Merritt suggest that the stories told by journalism are ill-suited to the role of citizens. The narratives of the "inside game" and the "horse race" should be abandoned for different "master narratives," ones which celebrate and encourage participation and collective inquiry.

Fourth, the focus upon elite sources and their competition and conflicts excludes the public from public life. As Rosen describes it, society is left with a "public sphere commandeered by insiders" (Rosen 1992 cited in Blumler and Gurevitch 1995: 214). As a result, public speech reflects their interests and concerns.

Finally, public journalism suggests that the general tone of criticism, even if it is directed at strategic issues and not policies, has become predominantly negative to the exclusion of constructive comment. Policies and initiatives that show promise are ignored or given less attention.

Public journalism's critique of modern journalism demands that journalists become more self-conscious of how they *construct* the news. This critique alone is of vital importance. Many journalists deny this truth about their profession. They continue to believe that they are simply messengers who are routinely blamed for the ideas of others reflected in their stories. Public journalism rejects this old defense. It forces journalists to reconsider the purpose of their craft and whether they are meeting the intersubjectively defined needs of the situation as revealed through pragmatic public deliberation.

I have also indicated that public journalism contains significant blindspots. Through the process of adopting Yankelovich's revised theory of communicative action Rosen and Merritt ground public opinion in a universal conception of human reason. By doing so, they hold to a view of the public sphere that privileges consensus and underestimates the need to understand the historically and socially rooted nature of rationality. If the public sphere is to be truly inclusive it must somehow acknowledge these differences which are themselves representative of various types of power relationships: male/female, majority/minority, rich/poor. But adding this complex of differences into our understanding of public life raises another question; one which is far too complicated to be answered in the context of this study, but which must, nevertheless, be addressed. Daniel Hallin (1994) puts it this way: "In what sense must political debate be rational?"

The pragmatic approach to communication adopted by public journalism suggests that deliberation about how we are to act in the context of a given set of problems must be validated by referring back to the needs of the situation which are in turn defined by our intersubjective awareness - in other words enlightened public opinion or public judgement. To repeat, Habermas argues that "We understand a speech act when we are acquainted with the kind of reasons that a speaker could cite in order to convince a hearer that he (the speaker) is entitled under the given circumstances to claim validity for this utterance." But what if different groups in society do not share the same intersubjective awareness? What if their understandings of the objective, social and subjective worlds differ? Two examples come to mind.

First, the public response to the not guilty verdict in the O.J. Simpson murder trial was,

generally speaking, split between the white and black communities in Los Angeles.[17]
Those who believed Simpson was guilty were outraged that he could be reprieved in the
face of so much material evidence. On the other hand, a large segment of the black
community dismissed the evidence. They believed that Simpson had been framed by a
prejudiced police force. The conclusion is entirely plausible, particularly if you, or
members of your community, are frequently victims of state sponsored violence. I am
thinking here of incidents like the police beating of Rodney King.

Second, discussions about issues are often hampered by competing claims over who is
entitled to speak. The old model of journalism ceded authority to experts. Public
journalism suggests that authority should be awarded to people who can provide a cogent
set of arguments. Public journalism, in theory, thus opens up the discussion to the broader
public. But, as I have suggested, the universal claim to reason not only erases differences
and the power relationships embedded in those differences, it is often rejected outright by
social groups. Populist, victims rights organizations are a case in point. Their calls for
tougher sentences for violent offenses are often met with statistics which indicate that: 1.
violent crime is actually in decline, and, 2. that there is little evidence that stricter sentences
actually provide a deterrent. The reply offered by representatives of victims rights
organizations often takes the form of a dismissal. They suggest that the criminologists
professing the value of their statistics would have a very different opinion of the matter if it
had been their son or daughter which had been killed. I do not wish to veer off into a

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17

There were, of course, other social cleavages which further complicated the public
understanding of the trial - male/female for instance.

100

debate over judicial sentencing. I simply want to indicate that people sometimes use their identities as members of specific groups to claim a privileged position from which to speak - a position that is not shared by all members of society. Situations in which this type of claim to authority occurs cannot be considered rational in the sense meant by Habermas and public journalism.

Public journalism recognizes that people construct different versions of the truth, but it still preserves the hope that those divergences can be smoothed over by addressing the core values of each group. The above examples indicate that is unlikely to occur. John Keane (1991) has attempted to resolve this tension by theorizing a "public service model" of media. Keane's model rejects the idea of the public sphere as a single unitary space in which members of the public carry out debate. Instead, a truly democratic media system would allow for a plurality of media which speak to the various ethnic, regional and social groupings. For Keane, an account of the "good held in common" is not necessary. His model is guided by ...

> ... a form of democratic scepticism which acknowledges the facts of complexity, diversity and difference, and - in plain English - harbours doubts about whether any one person, group, committee, party or organization can ever be trusted to make superior choices on matters of concern to citizens. (Keane 1991: 167)

In Keane's model, the problem of rationality is dealt with by celebrating disagreement and the empowerment that comes with the ability to express one's views.

On the other hand, is it not still necessary for different publics to talk to each other? Modern Western societies are still governed by national governments which make decisions which affect all citizens, regardless of difference. And, increasingly, these societies are affected by supra-national corporate interests. Nicholas Garnham makes a

strong argument against any future model of the media that overly privileges difference. He believes "the problem is to construct systems of democratic accountability integrated with media systems of matching scale that occupy the same social space as that over which economic or political decisions will impact" (Garnham 1992: 371). For Garnham, the unitary link or reference point is a particular critique of power. Garnham argues that political and economic interests dominate social spheres of interaction and that these forces cannot be escaped.

At the end of the day, members of civil society must have a method of communicating amongst each other - one that is open and democratic but which is capable of dealing with the concerns which come from living under a common national and corporate umbrella. Future research into journalism as a public sphere must investigate these questions further.

One point that Keane and Garnham do agree on is that the market cannot be left to command the structure and focus of democratic media. I argued in Chapters Three and Four that the goals of public journalism are incompatible with the market; not only does it tend to exclude participation due to the high cost of entry into the broadcasting and print industries, but it also affects the content of news. News organizations do not simply sell news information. Audiences are the principle product of media. And like all commodities, some audiences are in greater demand than others. Profit driven journalism is inextricably locked into the logic of the marketplace, and, as a result, it inevitably focuses on the concerns of more affluent audiences. Embracing the process of public judgement - as defined by Yankelovich - without concomitant steps to alleviate market forces will be of limited use. Future research into the creation of democratic media must

include a critique of the market and the promotional culture to which it is attached.

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