Recent Public Sphere Theory as an Evaluative Resource

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Abstract

To ground an assessment of community radio's contributions to political life, this paper reviews recent developments in public sphere theory and discourse ethics. Tracing a genealogy of thinking from Habermas to Warner, the paper argues that formative contexts of contemporary politics such as the radical pluralisation of culture, the emergence of lifestyle politics and the epistemic change to a communication paradigm – also powerful forces in community radio – can find parallel theoretical resources in recent writing on the public sphere. The dialectical engagement of open and inclusive publicity (associated with liberal public life), with a more enclosed, strategic approach (associated with community groups' decision processes) is not a theoretical obstacle, but a highly useful resource. Underpinning 'circulation of opinion' analysis, it can ground a contemporary policy analysis which values both normativity and diversity.

Towards a stronger form of democracy

In developing a critical account of the public sphere in the 20th Century, many political philosophers argued for 'strong' forms of democracy in which active citizens participate directly in achieving political outcomes, not just in debates about them. John Dewey and Hannah Arendt, for example, both took the 'strong' line – a position which contrasted with Jürgen Habermas's more cautious and pragmatic observation (1998) of a 'weak' form in the Western bureaucratic democracies, where citizens can participate only up to the point where policy decisions are cut off inside the machinery of the political-administrative complex. On a global scale, Habermas may be right on this, but in Australia community media is an interesting and significant transitional project which leads towards a stronger form of democracy. Community media's independence from the coercive powers of government and business, its empowerment of communities to speak for themselves, its encouragement of members to participate in management, and its dissolution of the boundaries between producers and consumers (compared with the carefully maintained boundaries of the commercial and public sectors), are all instances of its important place in this movement.

The domains of the market and of civil society are themselves the sites of struggles concerned with the strengthening of democracy, as ordinary citizens increasingly demand more than just a vote every few years. The past decade has seen huge public interest in media ethics, corporate citizenship, ethical investment practices and all kinds of participatory mechanisms in government (as well as in the governance of corporations). This has been characterised as an important shift towards deliberative democracy (Habermas, 1998). A rich and lively critical literature emerged in this area during the 90s, pointing (inter alia) to the need for analysis of culture, affective structures and sub-cultural formations. John Dryzek's work (1990, 2000) is of particular interest here, because it addresses the question of affect, arguing for inclusion of a broad range of communicative registers in authentic deliberation – beyond the calm, the polite and the technocratic, and preferring 'discursive democracy' to 'deliberative democracy' because of its inclusion of affect. Politics itself requires redefinition: in *Discursive Democracy* (2000:1), he describes the deliberative turn in the study of democracy since 1990, thus:

> The essence of democracy itself is now widely taken to be deliberation, as opposed to voting, interest aggregation, constitutional rights, or even self-government. The deliberative turn represents a renewed concern with the authenticity of democracy: the degree to which democratic control is substantive rather than symbolic, and engaged by competent citizens.

This is an important point, particularly salient to the educative role of community radio in developing 'competent citizens', and arguably a powerful argument for increased government support for the sector. Yet there is a risk that it can be seen as little more than a social pressure valve, producing and venting talk which has little effect on the major public debates of the day – a form of what Marcuse called 'repressive tolerance'. This is one implication of the term 'minority media': that they operate in a near private domain with minimal connection to the major function of the public sphere, which is to facilitate the formation of public opinion on matters of common political concern. However, we should not forget that community radio and television are broadcasters, not narrowcasters, so they are accessible widely and in public. And indeed, in recent years a great deal of high quality audience research has been undertaken in the community radio sector on its audience numbers – its scale of influence has been demonstrated, dismissing old claims of its insignificance, or that it is a waste of scarce frequencies.

While that audience research is interesting, indeed laudable, my interests lie in a very different area. I am concerned with the scope of community radio, rather than its scale. Does it make significant contributions to the public sphere, and how do those contributions engage with those of other participants? How does community media facilitate participation in the public sphere, and how significant is that in terms of its influence on policy formation? Why? Because over the past ten years the political and informational content of commercial radio has been dramatically reduced, and public complaints about the loss of local news, current affairs and information have been numerous and vociferous. So it is timely to examine the political and informational content of community and alternative media in order to assess its relative significance in the broad public sphere. This is an important level of analysis, because the understood political significance of community media (a strategy for strengthening democracy) is a fine and valuable goal, but at some point it needs to be evaluated. How do we know that we are achieving the goal?

There is a pragmatic reason for this kind of evaluation. With the development of blogs and similar new media forms which are commercially hosted, individually-operated and advertising-funded, liberal rationales for community media of all kinds have become vulnerable to technology-based challenges: the usual rationales for community media – community access, facilitating communication among marginal social groups, and ensuring that local voices are heard – all seem less urgent, given increasing availablility of commercially-based interactive media, blogs and podcasts on sites such as myspace, facebook and youtube. Given the incorporation of media policy inside communications policy, and given strong trends towards regulation by the market, it is appropriate to reassess the rationale for government subsidisation of the sector.

As my introductory comments imply, the idea of the public sphere provides a very useful framework to undertake such investigations because, internationally, it remains an elaborate and still vital field of theory. Most important, it has recently seen important developments which are very relevant to contemporary concerns with community,

culture and ethics. My aim in this paper is to outline such developments and to suggest some connections that can be made with community media, especially community radio. Framed by a 'community' perspective, this paper examines the possibility of using discourse ethics concepts to evaluate media and communication policy.

I note some special circumstances and limitations. As in many western countries, media policy has been subsumed inside communications policy as part of a large project of individualisation and commercialisation, and this has made it a more slippery and difficult policy object. Equally salient has been the change over the past quarter-century from a two-sector system (ABC, Commercial) to a four-sector system (ABC, Commercial, SBS, Community). In related changes, commercial radio's obligation to provide an 'adequate and comprehensive service' was greatly reduced, and accordingly, its public service programming (local news, current affairs and community service information) decreased dramatically. To compensate for losses in the commercial sector, ABC regional services expanded, and most significantly, hundreds of community radio services were licensed to serve local, cultural and social communities. These developments responded to major changes in social, economic and cultural structuration including the radical pluralisation of culture, the emergence of lifestyle politics as powerful political forces and the epistemic change to a communication paradigm.

The problem of cultural dissonances

There is a special tension between democracy and culture which must be taken into account here: the problematic of the plural polity. Given the multicultural nature of most modern societies, it is no longer possible to assume that the goal of Habermas's deliberative democracy – consensus on matters of public interest, reached by rational, fair and open deliberation in the public sphere – is achievable, as many social groups are unwilling and indeed unable to enter discussion with flexible approaches to final outcomes: genuine consensus is sometimes not a real option, especially in the short-term. That special limitation is therefore an important consideration in a discourse ethics of use in the 21st Century. Of course, this is a hotly debated area of current theory and I advance no special claim to resolving it, except to outline a way of viewing it through the prism of the counterpublic and then to consider the interaction between counterpublic and mainstream public spheres through analysis of the **circulation of opinion**.

The ethics of deliberation

There are a number of concepts from Habermas's work on the public sphere, discourse ethics and communicative action which help to address these questions. They rest on general pre-conditions of a 'universal pragmatics' of communication[1] (Habermas, 1984, 1987) which must be met before any public sphere can be a fair filtering mechanism, and thus effective in forming public opinion and constraining central governments. These are:

- all those affected by a proposal should arrive at a 'rationally motivated' agreement to act on it;
- they must have 'effective equality' to participate in the dialogue, which must be public in terms of access;

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[1] Habermas wrote of an 'ideal speech situation' in similar terms. This was a counter-factual model of democratic communication only ever approximated in any process of communicative action. However, it provides a useful template for policy evaluation and political action because it is based in social norms of procedural fairness and values of liberty, equality and social justice: gross deficits exposed to the public view will almost invariably be generally condemned.

- the dialogue must be unconstrained by political or economic force;
- participants must be able to challenge traditional norms that are tacitly assumed; and
- nothing should be taboo for rational discussion.

From the same sources, there are universal expectations of participants' commitment to truth, appropriateness and sincerity in their contributions, though argument and persuasion are allowed. Most important, although Habermas stresses the importance of participants' willingness to change their views, compromising to achieve a workable agreement, some forms of speech can be recognized as inimical. Against open forms of communicative action, we can distinguish non-communicative action – deceptive, manipulative and (insincere) strategic communication – collectively, strategic action.

Such pre-conditions have wide support within the community radio sector, arguably defining its core values. However, there are important qualifications that we would need to make in relation to special interest stations, and these will be discussed in turn.

The circulation of opinion
A focus on the circulation of opinion is especially valuable to a project of ethical evaluation, because it invites us to contextualise ethical practice in political, social and cultural terms. The political arena of 18th Century London was much broader than its citizens' truncated voting rights might suggest, and its discourse ethics were hardly polite. Private conversations, rumours and gossip of all kinds, coffee shop debates, transcriptions of them in the private press, rough and ready news-sheets, and discussion reflecting on any or all of these combined and recirculated without ceasing, to produce a constantly changing form of public opinion. Habermas's famous study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1991) documents this political composting, in rich studies of the formation and circulation of opinion. This key notion has not been used a lot since, perhaps because of Habermas's insistence there on the commodification of the bourgeois public sphere and its decline into mere spectacle and display through the industrialization of key institutions such as the press.

Michael Warner (2002) takes up and extends Habermas's discussion on the circulation of opinion in the public sphere, arguing for additional and special consideration of:
- the vigour of debate across a variety of media (mass and specialist) and institutions
- genuine social/cultural diversity of voices active in debate
- the extent to which social and cultural minorities were excluded or silenced, or the 'sanitisation' of debate was effected through any form of majority tyranny .

This approach, focusing on the circulation of opinion, is necessarily more concerned with an altogether rougher kind of political discussion, the realpolitik of actual discursive engagement. It does not assume an artificial debating-society politeness, and is centrally concerned with issues of affect, plural polities, and the definition of politics itself. Warner's discussion examines, for example, the 'sanitisation effect' of heteronormative assumptions and practices built-in to normalized public sphere processes, and the disingenuous commitment to equality of participation (as if 'rules' of debate can equalize fundamental and stark inequalities of position, education, income, social/cultural habitus). Community radio's inclusion of a diverse range of counterpublics defined by culture, religion, class and life interests mean that it is by definition affected by such

problems, and arguably has developed substantial skills in negotiating solutions. Rather than self-censoring, the sector is committed to giving expression to diverse and often conflicting values, ideas and opinions. At this stage, however, few academic studies are available.

Like Habermas, Dryzek (2000:8) sees a stronger democracy as a process of compromise in which participants should ideally be 'amenable to changing their judgements, preferences, and views' in the process of their engagement. The measure of the process's authenticity is the quality of communication, which should encourage 'reflection upon preferences without coercion'– a description very close to Habermas's. Coercion issues from 'domination, via the exercise of power, manipulation, indoctrination, propaganda, deception, expression of mere self-interest, threats, and the imposition of ideological conformity…' These, in Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action*, are 'distorting agents' inimical ethical communication, and thus to authentic democracy.

Dryzek's innovation is twofold: first, the avoidance of coercion implies something more than the expectation of an ethics of inclusion as in Habermas's deliberative process – genuine avoidance of manipulation implies a substantial degree of separate discursive development, if necessary in enclosed cells; and second, Dryzek expects the inclusion of 'argument, rhetoric, humour, emotion, testimony or story-telling, and gossip', all outside Habermas's boundaries. Acknowledging some of the negative potential of these communicative forms, Dryzek stresses that participants must avoid any attempt to coerce or dominate others, and that their contributions should be evaluated on the basis of their encouragement of wider reflection. That means democracy and deliberation are potentially compatible with entertainment, with emotional expression, and with rhetorically (even forcefully) expressed opinion, and the corollary is that those same communicative forms might also enhance democratic deliberation. Thus, in Dryzek's account, we move closer to the mood of the 18th Century coffee-shops and scandal sheets described by Habermas, with their rough and rapidly circulating debates.

Discourse ethics analysis should therefore examine the circulation of opinion through separate (but engaged) counterpublic spheres (Fraser, 1992) or even as sphericules in Gitlin's (1998) memorable image of the public sphere fallen and dashed into thousands of fragments, like spilled mercury. Van Vuuren (2006) supports a fragmented approach, arguing that a universally open and accessible approach to community broadcasting is not feasible in practice, and the reality has more to do with property rights. I agree with Fraser's less dramatic version, in which the feminist counterpublic sphere, for example, is not apparently open and inclusive like the broader, mainstream public sphere (of public inquiries, for example), but engages selectively and strategically within itself to define and express its sectoral identities, interests and needs before again engaging with the mainstream. For me, the public commitment to openness and accessibility is an important and necessary emancipatory ideal which (however 'subjunctive' in arguments like Warner's) increases the porosity of mainstream public sphere processes, against which the 'enclosed' minoritarian and counterpublic spheres develop and circulate their special sectoral ideas, ultimately releasing them selectively and strategically in the mainstream public sphere. Were the public sphere less porous, it would be less accessible to those counterpublics.

Taking up this point, Michael Warner argues in *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002:90) that a public can only be constituted reflexively: 'a public is the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse'. The conversation between discourses which takes

place routinely in any public must be based on imagination of the key discourse so that a responding discourse can be invented, and the link between the two is more than simply chronologically consecutive: it is social in character and interactive. But it is also multivalent, assuming onlookers as well as conversants, sworn enemies as well as partisan supporters, unknown parties as well as known. To characterise a public's internal processes in this way is, of course, to pluralise it radically. However, counterpublics' circulation of discourses should not be seen as replacing debate in the broader public sphere, but rather, augmenting it, paralleling it, and most important, engaging in conversation with it. This is ultimately a dialectical engagement, and as Fraser argues, one important aim of counterpublic discourse is always to influence mainstream discourse positively.

Consequently, this approach diverges from Habermas in two directions: towards a focus on the politics and dynamics of circulation on the one hand; and towards the specific discourse ethics of individual counterpublic spheres, on the other. Fortunately, computer technologies have made such analytical tracking and analysis a lot easier through increasing access, even at a distance (particularly through the online archiving of blogs, discussion groups, the press and radio broadcasts). What is more, small groups and even individuals now have access to these technologies so that tracking a wide range of views and contributions is increasingly feasible and valuable. Community radio's archives and webcasts are therefore of increasing socio-political importance.

The discourse ethics of the counterpublic sphere
First, of course, there is no single object of this kind. But as an example, I will briefly discuss Fraser's feminist counterpublic sphere, which begins by re-defining politics (in the domain of the personal/private rather than the public), and re-frames democracy socially (the interaction of social groups, rather than the exercise of personal choice). These changes imply a different kind of discourse ethics – based on strategic group definition rather than on residues of enlightenment ideals. Fraser's (1992) re-formulation of the public sphere to include within it 'counterpublic spheres' widens its critical uses enormously and reverses its subject-object construction. Counterpublics (an idea she takes from Felski, 1989) routinely produce texts which are public, but whose meanings are most accessible mainly to identified members of particular publics because they have been circulated by and among them as part of a counter-discourse. In an influential critique of Habermas's conception of the public sphere, Fraser coined this phrase to increase recognition of oppositional publics, who, excluded from the mainstream unitary public sphere, must organize arenas to debate and nurture their own 'needs, objectives and strategies'. Apart from her pluralized re-conception of the public, Fraser's ideas of discourse, politics and the public sphere all differ from those of Habermas. Where he emphasizes the relationship between discourse and intersubjectivity, Fraser emphasizes social embeddedness; Habermas problematises political-administrative political channels, Fraser charts counterpublic formation and action; where Habermas's epistemological and ontological foundations are idealist, accounting for the formation of inter-subjectivity through enlightenment values of truth, justice and equality, Fraser's approach is somewhat more pragmatic.

In her plural conception of politics, Fraser identifies many 'subordinated social groups' - women, workers, people of colour and gays and lesbians – as 'subaltern counter-publics' (1992:124). These are not just niche-markets or sub-publics (eg JJJ rather than FOX-FM listeners). They are actively constituted through their opposition to the dominant culture – and to survive, they need to 'invent and circulate counterdiscourses [and] to formulate

oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (my emphasis). This is an alternative vision of the locus of politics itself, emanating from the 60s nostrum of politics as personal. Fraser points to the ways in which feminist counterpublics have organized many public sphere spaces in the form of journals, bookstores, film and video distribution networks, lectures, local meeting places. What is being circulated through these counter-public spheres is those invented counter-discourses: the discourse of 'sexism' and 'sexual harassment' among many others. Over time, those discourses have come to circulate more widely and generally – moving into the general discourses of the media, the mass circulation of the broader public sphere.

Fraser specifically acknowledges that counterpublic institutions and processes are often not 'democratic' in the broad sense that Habermas's 'bourgeois public sphere' expects: they are often **not** open and accessible. As socially and culturally-defined formations, they exclude more than they include. This is understandable and necessary: one does not expect feminists to routinely include men in their policy-making processes (except for exceptional purposes). In this view, democracy implies both general (open) and specific (closed) discursive processes, because inequalities of power make separate structures necessary and desirable. Such an approach points to the social basis of segmentation, recognizing that democratic deliberation must primarily ensure that the policy views of oppressed and minority groups are heard. It is not enough to have obscure 'public inquiries' which provide an official invitation to what amounts to mere display. This notion of the counterdiscourses of particular counter-publics has important implications: the rational-critical debate of middle-class readers has little place in the critical discourse of young punks, or skate-boarders or the disabled or trans-gender groups. So dialogical modes of communication, where we can identify them, could arguably suggest that important political deliberation is happening. Importantly, this opens up the idea of public spheres inside popular culture.

The new lifestyle politics are thus very different from party politics, and require a certain insulation and enclosure from publicity for policy development. Habermas would certainly not dispute this, but the pragmatic focus in some of his work on the political-administrative machinery of government can suggest otherwise. In *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas (1998) also pluralised his notion of the public sphere quite radically, explicitly abandoning any necessary connection with institutions, and directing our attention to the discursive pre-conditions of deliberative discussion as constitutive (potentially) of multiple, overlapping and even conflictual public spheres. Public spheres could be seen as constituted at any geographic level (not just at the national political-administrative sluices), their status and their validity dependent on their discourse ethics. However, it should be noted that neither Habermas nor Fraser abandon institutions completely – for both, they remain essential infrastructure, necessary but not sufficient pre-conditions of the public sphere, which is only constituted performatively, in deliberating on matters of public political concern.

Habermas's essay *Further Reflections on the Public Sphere* (1992) admits the possibility of a plebeian public sphere in which popular culture is a unique and important discursive formation. Among other significant changes, this essay also radically rethought the role of women in the bourgeois public sphere. The term has since developed its own semantic life in contemporary sociology and cultural studies. Against many appropriations which use the concept as though it were an institution, Habermas's revised formulation of the 'public sphere' in *Between Facts and Norms* (1998:360) emphasizes its ideal (rather than concrete) character:

> The public sphere is a social phenomenon just as elementary as action, actor, association or collectivity, but it eludes the conventional sociological concepts of 'social order'. The public sphere cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organization. It is not even a framework of norms with differentiated competences and roles, membership regulations, and so on. Just as little does it represent a system; although it permits one to draw internal boundaries, outwardly it is characterized by open, permeable and shifting horizons. The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e. opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified *public* opinions.

Habermas's 'public sphere', as a network which processes opinions, suggests lateral, capillary possibilities. Its emphasis is on the action necessary to constitute this special communicative form. So a library, a museum, or a community radio station can never be a public sphere, though like the coffee shops of Eighteenth Century London, any of them might under the right circumstances host it. The 'public sphere' is a kind of speech, communicative action in a space between public and private domains of state and home. We can see Australian community radio as occupying a very similar kind of social space, and performing very similar political processing, as institutional infrastructure which supports its constituent groups' contributions to the public sphere.

Another important theoretical development in Habermas's move to a communication practice model is his increased emphasis on dialogue or conversation. Citing Peters' sluice model of democratic decision-making, Habermas argued in *Between Facts and Norms* that deliberative democracy is only viable where there are two-way channels from outside the administrative structures of government to the centre (1998:356). Habermas (1992) had come to agree with his critics that developments in areas such as the Internet require the revision of his pessimistic early public sphere theory, which cast modern media as structures of dominance rather than democracy. The capacity of the Internet to promote dialogue and share information, with inter-penetration of new and old media, has created new fora for political and cultural exchange, and many of these fulfil his requirement of deliberative democracy that political ideas should originate outside the central structures as well as in.

Evaluating media policy
How can discourse ethics assist in the process of evaluating media policy? First, we need to reseat media policy as a subset of the larger communications policy and take opportunities as they come, sometimes inside new and unfamiliar frameworks such as Information Technology. The identification of some of these currently significant hybrid fields is a task of some pragmatic urgency.

Habermas's general pre-conditions for ethical politics – the 'universal pragmatics' of communicative action – continue to provide a solid basis for evaluation of communications in the mainstream public sphere. From his discourse ethics, and particularly its contrasting of non-communicative action – deception, manipulation and strategic communication – from open forms of communicative action, there are very specific analytical tools which have great practical applicability.

Inside specific counterpublic spheres, a slightly different analysis is necessary. Here, it is necessary to mute the analysis of strategic communication, since that is what counterpublics routinely produce. Most important here is the identification of distinctive cultural forms which emerge as expressions of 'needs, identities and strategies', often in the form of slogans and metaphors; and even of those formations and groups identified as enemies. We must expect strategic contributions of this kind, even in the public sphere, where it is expected that participants will be prepared to change their minds, compromise, adjust their arguments and demands. This must stop short, however, of strategic communication of the kind we think of as 'spin' – routinely produced by corporate and bureaucratic sources – in that we expect without qualification that participants' contributions will be sincere, truthful, advanced in good faith.

Possibly the most important component of such evaluation, however, is the tracking of dialogical engagements between counterpublics and between counterpublics and mainstream public sphere institutions (such as mainstream media), which, however marginal their claim to the public sphere, nevertheless specialise in tracking many engagements in their (variably defensible) constructions of public opinion. Such tracking is not only an academic exercise in counting what's in and what's out of the mainstream public sphere, but should examine significant discursive changes and hybridisations. Importantly, it may also perform an active and engaged function as a corrective.

Finally, acknowledging the political content in 'apolitical' media is most important. As Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor (1994) has pointed out, modern identity politics are more often than not transmitted and recognized in cultural (rather than traditional political) forms, but this is an inherently political process, as practice demands the universal recognition of group identities, a demand only achievable through political means. The discourse ethics approach is again useful in recovering some under-valued and un-heard voices into policy evaluation.

The use of these tools in tracking and evaluating political engagements, broadly defined to include alternative, counterpublic and even apparently apolitical formations has some clear advantages over the tools currently used in policy analysis: they encourage the documentation of significant engagements, they identify important flux and movement in dialogue, and they recognize and assert the importance of group identities – one of the major lacunae in liberal thinking. In making **circulation** a key focus, it may also assist in restoring media policy's special place in political thinking by actively promoting the communication rights of social and cultural groups. For pragmatic and strategic reasons, and because discourse ethics defines the central purpose of community radio – strengthening democracy – this kind of analysis has many potential uses in the community sector.

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