

## Can We Revitalize the Public Sphere From the Ground Up?

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Given the overwhelming volatility of this moment, what value is there to contemplating the evolution of Habermas's political theory as outlined in his 2023 book, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*? For us, the answer lies in the questions the treatise raises, which we believe are timely—but also in the absences of what he does not address. In the article that follows, we offer an assessment of where we believe Habermas's analysis may be helpful, elements that warrant greater consideration, and some examples from our own work engaging with relevant sectors of journalism and communication infrastructure, where we see local building blocks of the public sphere.

### Raising an Alarm

A through-line in Habermas's (2023) updated reflections is a deep concern over political regression, where the "political public sphere disintegrates" (p. 98). We share Habermas's concern that deliberative democracies are fragile and vulnerable to right-wing populist attacks. Likewise, we agree that a key contributor to this fragility is the stark social inequities generated by the current particularly savage iteration of capitalism. Habermas (2023) also argues that the actions of Trump supporters on January 6th, 2021, would not have happened "if the political elites had not for decades disappointed the legitimate, constitutionally guaranteed expectations of a significant portion of their citizens" (p. 9). However, we think this interpretation ignores the racial underpinnings of Trump supporters who perceived their White privilege being threatened by institutions that were at least partially open to demographic change and racial equity.

We also believe Habermas raises important concerns regarding unregulated social media platforms and the decline of print journalism. For Habermas (2023), the shift from widespread use of print news to digital and social media has contributed to the mushrooming of "a desolate cacophony" of fragmented echo chambers, and a blurring of what makes the public sphere distinct from the private (p. 21). We share Habermas's concern that spaces for discussing and deliberating a shared set of stories and facts are increasingly rare. We also agree that platforms need to be regulated in some way to hold them responsible for "duties of journalistic due diligence" (Habermas, 2023, p. 58). However, we part ways when trying to

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answer a question implied by the concerns he notes: How can we build a more resilient public sphere to support and sustain more equitable democracies?

In considering pathways forward, we believe Habermas's analysis would be strengthened by more fully engaging with some factors that have contributed to the breakdown of, or failure to form, a shared public sphere. At several points he hints at the existence of more inclusive and pluralistic public spheres in the past. However, as scholars focused on subaltern counterpublic spheres have long argued (Dawson, 1995; Fraser, 1990), for many members of marginalized communities, participating in a shared bourgeois public sphere has never been a possibility due to inequitable access to resources and social capital, and the exclusionary practices of gatekeepers.

### **The Problem With Gatekeepers**

Because of this, we would like to problematize Habermas's (2023) lament of the loss of the "gatekeeping role" (p. 31) played by professional journalists. As he argues, professional journalists, particularly print journalists, have long played a role selecting and examining content based on "generally accepted cognitive standards" (Habermas, 2023, p. 39). We think it is worth inquiring, "generally accepted" by whom? In the United States and many countries, professional journalists have historically been disproportionately White and male—and often coming from middle- or upper-class backgrounds. While the resulting journalism they have produced from within "mainstream" majority-White news organizations has often been cloaked in the language of "objectivity," it has in practice overrepresented the voices and perspectives of people in positions of power who were White and male, and at times actively harming Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities (Callison & Young, 2019; Robinson & Culver, 2019; Torres et al., 2020). Likewise, print, like platforms, have historically prioritized paying consumers. For example, U.S. metro newspapers have long been critiqued for centering the needs and interests of White suburban subscribers, even if the city was majority BIPOC.

We acknowledge, then, that the "great emancipatory promise" (Habermas, 2023, p. 37) of the Internet has been stunted by the "libertarian grimace" of Silicon Valley's corporations (p. 38) and their platforms where extremist and hateful speech run rampant. But we cannot create a more equitable public sphere by rolling back the influence of platforms alone. For marginalized groups there never was a golden age of print journalism. Building a more equitable public sphere requires not just addressing the medium or platform but also the power dynamics of gatekeeping built into their structures.

### **The Overlooked Potential of Place**

While we think a return to gatekeeping is for the most part impossible and misguided, we do think it is important to look for opportunities to strengthen deliberative public spheres. In doing so, we turn to an area Habermas largely dismisses—the value of place and of local storytelling. Communication Infrastructure Theory (CIT; Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001; Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006) holds that within communities, there are multiple actors sharing stories—who have the potential to foster deliberation on community issues and solutions. This includes local media, community organizations, and networks of residents—who form a "storytelling network." CIT researchers, in neighborhoods from Los Angeles to Seoul, have found that in

areas where these networks are highly integrated, residents tended to have higher levels of civic participation and a greater sense of belonging to a shared a community.

For Habermas (2023), face-to-face interaction, or the “local regions of the public sphere,” only became relevant if amplified by mass media—“the only domain in which the communicative din can condense into relevant and effective public opinions” (p. 31). To us, this view is too total and too macro. The conditions for people to subjectively adhere to democratic principles and have allegiance to the procedures and institutions that hold it all together is a multilevel process. It is at the local level that democratic deliberation can be the most accessible. This is why local media that engages community stakeholders in equitable and inclusive relationships are critical.

We have seen in our own engaged communication research how interventions to strengthen communication infrastructure at the local level can hold promise when it comes to encouraging a deliberative public sphere. For example, through the Alhambra Project, we followed an effort to increase civic participation through the creation of a research-based digital hyperlocal news site, the Alhambra Source, from 2010 to 2020. When the Alhambra Source launched, civic engagement in Alhambra, a diverse city in Los Angeles County, was so low that city council elections were canceled when no one ran against incumbents. The Alhambra Source actively involved community members as contributors who wrote stories with guidance from professional journalists (Gerson, Chen, Wenzel, Ball-Rokeach, & Parks, 2017). Researchers tracked the multiple ways it held local government accountable and created bridges between residents from different ethnic backgrounds (Chen et al., 2017). Participants went on to develop community organizations and to actively engage in local politics.

With the Alhambra Source, and more recent interventions that integrate more social media, we have grappled with Habermas’s (2023) notion of “authorial competence” that “has to be learned” (p. 39). These projects have involved working with community members with no professional journalism experience to produce content. We have found that these interventions require questioning assumptions of what “authorial competence” looks like—if they are to build trust with historically marginalized communities that have never seen themselves reflected respectfully or authentically in mass media.

For example, the research-based project the Germantown Info Hub has served a majority Black neighborhood of Philadelphia where residents felt stigmatized by majority White mass media (Wenzel, 2020). The project’s community reporter and community contributors do produce solutions-oriented news for a digital site, but they put more emphasis on circulating information on community resources through SMS text and e-newsletters, social media, and a community radio program. They have also sought to create welcoming spaces for in-person events to explore community issues—highlighting the convening potential for journalism, something that cannot be replaced by AI. Having grown out of a research study in 2018, the Germantown Info Hub is now part of a larger journalism non-profit organization, Resolve Philly, which plans to explore the potential to network information hubs—something which could offer a pathway to connect hyperlocal regions of the public sphere with at least local mass media (Wenzel, 2023). Other nascent interventions use WhatsApp channels, social, and video to meet the needs of marginalized youth and refugee communities—often exploring collaborations with metro-level mass media. All demonstrate the importance of engaging communities in deliberation at the local level of the public sphere.

### Building More Equitable Spaces for Deliberation

Habermas (2023) also notes that it is a precondition for the “survival of a democratic polity” that people see themselves as participants in a process of pursuing human rights—even if they do not yet have them (p. 7). We agree with this. We think this underlines the importance of supporting avenues for local participation—and for paying greater attention to spaces of resistance and social movements. As we write this in 2024, there is a glaring example of how focusing on mass media alone offers a distorted understanding of social movements—in particular, of U.S. student protests against U.S. support for Israel’s bombardment of Gaza. Mainstream coverage has offered a very different perspective from student or social media channels. The latter has been invaluable for people wishing to connect with the social movement. While Habermas himself has expressed opposition to critique of Israel’s actions, social media sites have been active, if difficult, spaces to engage with a “cacophony of conflicting public opinion” (Habermas, 2023, p. 17). While far from perfect, they have been at least one avenue for deliberative politics with the potential “to *improve* our beliefs in political disputes and get *closer* to correct solutions to problems” (Habermas, 2023, p. 17).

This is all to say, we too are alarmed about the current moment. The fragility of democratic deliberation and the threat of disintegration into violence is palpable. But looking ahead, responses to the crisis need to account for both the limitations and possibilities that come from grappling with the complexity of diverse, and marginalized, publics—and multilevel processes. We hope there will be more opportunities to nurture local spaces for deliberation and to work to knit them together to build more equitable and resilient public spheres.

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