

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research<sup>1</sup>

Jürgen Habermas

Philosophy Department, Johann-Wolfgang Goethe Universität Frankfurt, Frankfurt, Germany

*I first compare the deliberative to the liberal and the republican models of democracy, and consider possible references to empirical research and then examine what empirical evidence there is for the assumption that political deliberation develops a truth-tracking potential. The main parts of the paper serve to dispel prima facie doubts about the empirical content and the applicability of the communication model of deliberative politics. It moreover highlights 2 critical conditions: mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies only if a self-regulating media system gains independence from its social environments and if anonymous audiences grant a feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society.*

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In Aristotle's *Politics*, normative theorizing and empirical research go hand in hand. Yet, contemporary theories of liberal democracy express a demanding "ought" that faces the sobering "is" of ever more complex societies. Especially, the deliberative model of democracy, which claims an epistemic dimension for the democratic procedures of legitimation, appears to exemplify the widening gap between normative and empirical approaches toward politics.

Let me first compare the deliberative to the liberal and the republican models of democracy, and consider possible references to empirical research. I will then examine what empirical evidence there is for the assumption that political deliberation develops a truth-tracking potential. The main parts of the paper serve to dispel *prima facie* doubts about the empirical content and the applicability of the deliberative model. The communication model of deliberative politics that I wish to present highlights two critical conditions: Mediated political communication in the public sphere can facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies only if

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Corresponding author: Jürgen Habermas

a self-regulating media system gains independence from its social environments, and if anonymous audiences grant feedback between an informed elite discourse and a responsive civil society.

### **Empirical references for normative theories of democracy**

The institutional design of modern democracies brings together three elements: first, the private autonomy of citizens, each of whom pursues a life of his or her own; second, democratic citizenship, that is, the inclusion of free and equal citizens in the political community; and third, the independence of a public sphere that operates as an intermediary system between state and society. These elements form the normative bedrock of liberal democracies (irrespective of the diversity otherwise of constitutional texts and legal orders, political institutions, and practices). The institutional design is to guarantee (a) the equal protection of individual members of civil society by the rule of law through a system of basic liberties that is compatible with the same liberties for everybody; equal access to and protection by independent courts; and a separation of powers between legislation, jurisdiction, and the executive branch that ties public administration to the law. The design is to guarantee (b) the political participation of as many interested citizens as possible through equal communication and participation rights; periodic elections (and referendums) on the basis of an inclusive suffrage; the competition between different parties, platforms, and programs; and the majority principle for political decisions in representative bodies. The design is to guarantee (c) an appropriate contribution of a political public sphere to the formation of considered public opinions through a separation of a (tax-based) state from a (market-based) society, communication and association rights and a regulation of the power structure of the public sphere securing the diversity of independent mass media, and a general access of inclusive mass audiences to the public sphere.

This institutional design embodies ideas from different political philosophies. Each of these major traditions gives a different weighting to equal liberties for everybody, democratic participation, and government by public opinion (Habermas, 1998, pp. 239–252). The liberal tradition reveals a preference for the liberties of private citizens, whereas republican and deliberative traditions stress either the political participation of active citizens or the formation of considered public opinions. These strands of political thought impact in different ways on national political cultures, thereby creating specific relations between *theory* and *practice*. They inform different legal traditions and different national frameworks for those public discourses that maintain and transform political cultures and collective identities (Peters, 2005). The different weighting that citizens of different nations assign to rights and liberties, to inclusion and equality, or to public deliberation and problem solving determines how they see themselves as members of their political community.

Using such ideas to design empirical research projects is another more indirect way to build a bridge between normative theory and political reality. Normative theory did actually serve as a guide for research in certain fields of political science. This explains

the elective affinities between political liberalism and the economic theory of democracy (Arrow, 1963) on the one hand, and between republicanism and communitarian approaches (which focus on trust and other sources of solidarity [“habits of the heart”]) on the other (Bellah, 1975; Putnam, 2000). The deliberative model is interested more in the epistemic function of discourse and negotiation than in rational choice or political ethos. Here, the cooperative search of deliberating citizens for solutions to political problems takes the place of the preference aggregation of private citizens or the collective self-determination of an ethically integrated nation.

The deliberative paradigm offers as its main empirical point of reference a democratic process, which is supposed to generate legitimacy through a procedure of opinion and will formation that grants (a) publicity and transparency for the deliberative process, (b) inclusion and equal opportunity for participation, and (c) a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes (mainly in view of the impact of arguments on rational changes in preference) (Bohman, 1996; Bohman & Rehg, 1997).

The presumption of reasonable outcomes rests in turn on the assumption that institutionalized discourses mobilize relevant topics and claims, promote the critical evaluation of contributions, and lead to rationally motivated yes or no reactions. Deliberation is a demanding form of communication, though it grows out of inconspicuous *daily routines* of asking for and giving reasons. In the course of everyday practices, actors are always already exposed to a space of reasons. They cannot but mutually raise validity claims for their utterances and claim that what they say should be assumed—and, if necessary, could be proved—to be true or right or sincere, and at any rate rational. An implicit reference to rational discourse—or the competition for better reasons—is built into communicative action as an omnipresent alternative to routine behavior.

Ideas enter into social reality via the idealizing presuppositions innate in everyday practices and inconspicuously acquire the quality of stubborn social facts.<sup>2</sup> Similar presuppositions are implicit in political and legal practices, too. Take the example of the so-called voter’s paradox (which is not a paradox at all): Citizens continue to participate in general elections despite what political scientists, from the viewpoint of observers, claim about the marginalizing effects of electoral geography or voting procedures. The democratic practice of voting constitutes a collective enterprise and requires of the participants that they proceed on the assumption that every vote “counts.” Likewise, litigants do not stop going to court, irrespective of what law professors observe and pronounce about the indeterminacy of laws and the unpredictability of legal decisions. The rule of law and the practice of adjudication would break down, were participants not to act on the premise that they receive fair treatment and that a reasonable verdict is passed down.

### **The truth-tracking potential of political deliberation**

Whether deliberation does indeed introduce an epistemic dimension into political will-formation and decision-making is, of course, an empirical question. There is

already an impressive body of small-group studies that construe political communication as a mechanism for the enhancement of cooperative learning and collective problem solving. For instance, Neblo (in press) has translated major assumptions of normative theory into hypotheses about how experimental groups learn through deliberation on political issues (such as affirmative action, gays in the military, or the distributive justice of flat tax schemes). Individuals were first asked for their opinions on these issues; 5 weeks later, they were placed in groups and asked to debate the same questions and reach collective decisions; and 5 weeks after deliberation, they were each asked again to offer their individual opinions.

The findings more or less corroborate the expected impact of deliberation on the formation of *considered* political opinion. The process of group deliberation resulted in a unidirectional change and not in a polarization of opinions. Final decisions were quite different from the initial opinions expressed and opinions changed reflecting improved levels of information, and broader perspectives on a clearer and more specific definition of issues. Impersonal arguments tended to take priority over the influence of interpersonal relations, and there was also an increasing trust expressed in the procedural legitimacy of fair argumentation.

Other examples are James Fishkin's (1995; also Fishkin & Luskin, 2005) famous experiments with focus groups or field experiments such as that with the 160 British Columbians who were drawn at random from voters' lists for a Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform, then met on six weekends specifically in order to "learn about, deliberate on, and decide between three alternative proposals." Evidence of the impact of deliberation on the structuration of preferences has not only triggered criticism of the rational-choice paradigm (Heath, 2001; Johnson, 1993) but also motivated new research on framing effects in political preference formation. Druckman (2004) writes, "individuals who engage in conversations with a heterogeneous group will be less susceptible to framing effects than those who do not engage in conversations" (p. 675). Expert groups (from multinational corporations) and counterexperts (from nongovernmental organizations) who met under the auspices of the Berlin *Wissenschaftszentrum* are closer to real-life politics. These mediation groups were convened explicitly to discuss conflicting views on policy issues (risks of cultivating genetically modified plants and intellectual property rights in biotechnology vs. epidemic health care in underdeveloped regions) (Van den Daele, 1994, 1996; World Business Council for Sustainable Development and Science Center Berlin, 2003).

All these studies offer empirical evidence for the cognitive potential of political deliberation. However, small-scale samples can only lend limited support to the empirical content of a deliberative paradigm designed for legitimation processes in large-scale or national societies. Contemporary Western societies display an impressive increase in the volume of political communication (Van den Daele & Neidhardt, 1996), but the political public sphere is at the same time dominated by the kind of mediated communication that lacks the defining features of deliberation.<sup>3</sup> Evident shortcomings in this regard are (a) the lack of face-to-face interaction between present participants in a shared practice of collective decision making and (b) the

lack of reciprocity between the roles of speakers and addressees in an egalitarian exchange of claims and opinions.

Moreover, the *dynamics* of mass communication are driven by the power of the media to select, and shape the presentation of, messages and by the strategic use of political and social power to influence the agendas as well as the triggering and framing of public issues.

Before addressing the latter issue of powerful interventions, I shall first explain why neither the abstract character of a public sphere that detaches opinions from decisions nor the asymmetric actor–audience relation on the virtual stage of mediated communication are dissonant features per se, in other words, factors that would deny the applicability of the model of deliberative politics. Mediated political communication need not fit the pattern of fully fledged deliberation. Political communication, circulating from the bottom up and the top down throughout a multilevel system (from everyday talk in civil society, through public discourse and mediated communication in weak publics, to the institutionalized discourses at the center of the political system), takes on quite different forms in different arenas. The public sphere forms the periphery of a political system and can well facilitate deliberative legitimation processes by “laundering” flows of political communication through a division of labor with other parts of the system.

### **The structure of mass communication and the formation of considered public opinions<sup>4</sup>**

Imagine the public sphere as an intermediary system of communication between formally organized and informal face-to-face deliberations in arenas at both the top and the bottom of the political system. There is empirical evidence for an impact of deliberation on decision-making processes in national legislatures (Steiner, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steenbergen, 2004; see also Habermas, 2005, p. 389) and in other political institutions as there is for the learning effects of ruminating political conversations among citizens in everyday life (Johnston Canover & Searing, 2005). But I will focus only on what political communication in the public sphere can contribute to a deliberative legitimation process.

The center of the political system consists of the familiar institutions: parliaments, courts, administrative agencies, and government. Each branch can be described as a specialized deliberative arena. The corresponding output—legislative decisions and political programs, rulings or verdicts, administrative measures and decrees, guidelines, and policies—results from different types of institutionalized deliberation and negotiation processes. At the periphery of the political system, the public sphere is rooted in networks for wild flows of messages—news, reports, commentaries, talks, scenes and images, and shows and movies with an informative, polemical, educational, or entertaining content. These *published opinions* originate from various types of actors—politicians and political parties, lobbyists and pressure groups, or actors of civil society. They are selected and shaped by mass-media

professionals and received by broad and overlapping audiences, camps, subcultures, and so on. From the spectrum of published political opinions, we can distinguish, as *polled opinion*, the measured aggregate of pro or con attitudes to controversial public issues as they tacitly take shape within weak publics. These attitudes are influenced by everyday talk in the informal settings or episodic publics of civil society at least as much as they are by paying attention to print or electronic media.

There are two types of actors without whom no political public sphere could be put to work: professionals of the media system—especially *journalists* who edit news, reports, and commentaries—and *politicians* who occupy the centre of the political system and are both the coauthors and addressees of public opinions. Mediated political communication is carried on by an elite. We can distinguish five more types among the actors who make their appearance on the virtual stage of an established public sphere: (a) *lobbyists* who represent special interest groups; (b) *advocates* who either represent general interest groups or substitute for a lack of representation of marginalized groups that are unable to voice their interests effectively; (c) *experts* who are credited with professional or scientific knowledge in some specialized area and are invited to give advice; (d) *moral entrepreneurs* who generate public attention for supposedly neglected issues; and, last but not least, (e) *intellectuals* who have gained, unlike advocates or moral entrepreneurs, a perceived personal reputation in some field (e.g., as writers or academics) and who engage, unlike experts and lobbyists, spontaneously in public discourse with the declared intention of promoting general interests.

Only across the system as a whole can deliberation be expected to operate as a cleansing mechanism that filters out the “muddy” elements from a discursively structured legitimation process. As an essential element of the democratic process, deliberation is expected to fulfill three functions: to mobilize and pool relevant issues and required information, and to specify interpretations; to process such contributions discursively by means of proper arguments for and against; and to generate rationally motivated *yes* and *no* attitudes that are expected to determine the outcome of procedurally correct decisions.

In view of the legitimation process as a whole, the facilitating role of the political public sphere is mainly to fulfill only the first of these functions and thereby to prepare the agendas for political institutions. To put it in a nutshell, the deliberative model expects the political public sphere to ensure the formation of a plurality of considered public opinions. This is still a quite demanding expectation, but in communications research, a realistic scheme of necessary conditions for the generation of considered public opinions can yield nonarbitrary standards for the identification of the causes of communication pathologies.

Let me develop such a communication model for democratic legitimation in two steps and start by reminding you of the larger picture: the interaction between the state and its social environments.

The state faces demands from two sides. In addition to rules and regulations, it has to provide public goods and services for civil society, as well as subsidies and infrastructure for various functional systems, such as commerce or the labor market,

health, social security, traffic, energy, research and development, education, and so on. Through lobbies and neocorporatist negotiations, representatives of the functional systems confront the administration with what they present as “functional imperatives.” Representatives of particular systems can threaten with imminent failures, such as growing inflation or flight of capital, traffic collapse, a shortage of housing or energy supplies, a lack of skilled workers, a brain drain toward foreign countries, and so on. The disturbing impact of such strains or crises on citizens in their role as clients of the corresponding subsystems is filtered through the distributional patterns of class structures. Associational networks of civil society and special interest groups translate the strain of pending social problems and conflicting demands for social justice into political issues. Actors of civil society articulate political interests and confront the state with demands arising from the life worlds of various groups. With the legal backing of voting rights, such demands can be strengthened by threatening to withdraw legitimation.

However, votes do not “naturally” grow out of the soil of civil society. Before they pass the formal threshold of campaigns and general elections, they are shaped by the confused din of voices rising from both everyday talk and mediated communication. Depending on democratic legitimation, at its periphery, the political system thus possesses an open flank vis-à-vis civil society, namely, the unruly life of the public sphere.

Organizations for public opinion research continuously monitor and register the attitudes of private citizens. Media professionals produce an elite discourse, fed by actors who struggle for access to and influence on the media. Those actors enter the stage from three points: Politicians and political parties start from the center of the political system; lobbyists and special interest groups come from the vantage point of the functional systems and status groups they represent; and advocates, public interest groups, churches, intellectuals, and moral entrepreneurs come from backgrounds in civil society.

Together with journalists, all of them join in the construction of what we call “public opinion,” though this singular phrase only refers to the prevailing one among several public opinions. Such clusters of synthesized issues and contributions at the same time exhibit the respective weights of the accumulated *yes* or *no* attitudes that they attract from various audiences. Public opinions are hard to pin down; they are jointly constructed by political elites and diffuse audiences from the perceived differences between published opinions and the statistical records of polled opinions. Public opinions exert a kind of soft pressure on the malleable shape of minds. This kind of “political influence” must be distinguished from “political power,” which is attached to offices and authorizes collectively binding decisions. The influence of public opinions spreads in opposite directions, turning both toward a government busy carefully watching it and backward toward the reflecting audiences from where it first originated.

That both elected governments and voters can take an affirmative, a negative, or an indifferent attitude toward public opinion highlights the most important trait of

the public sphere, namely, its reflexive character. All participants can revisit perceived public opinions and respond to them after reconsideration. These responses, from above as well as from below, provide a double test as to how effective political communication in the public sphere functions as a filtering mechanism. If it works, only considered public opinions pass through it. Public opinions make manifest what large but conflicting sectors of the population consider in the light of available information to be the most plausible interpretations of each of the controversial issues at hand.

From the viewpoint of responsive governments and political elites, considered public opinions set the frame for the range of what the public of citizens would accept as legitimate decisions in a given case. For responsive voters, who engage in everyday political talk, read newspapers, watch television, and do or do not participate in elections, considered public opinions likewise present plausible alternatives for what counts as a reasonable position on public issues. It is the formal vote and the actual opinion and will formation of *individual* voters that together connect the peripheral flows of political communication in civil society and the public sphere with the deliberative decision making of political institutions at the center, thus filtering them into the wider circuitry of deliberative politics. Gerhards (1993, p. 26) writes, “the relevance of public opinion both for the public and for the decision-makers ... is secured in competitive democracies in the final instance by the institution of voting.”

Notwithstanding the impersonal and asymmetrical structure of mass communication, the public sphere could, if circumstances were only favorable, generate considered public opinions. I use the conditional here to draw your attention to the other obvious reservation: The power structure of the public sphere may well distort the dynamics of mass communications and interfere with the normative requirement that *relevant* issues, *required* information, and *appropriate* contributions be mobilized.

### **The power structure of the public sphere and the dynamics of mass communication**

Power is not illegitimate per se. Let me distinguish four categories. There is first *political power*, which by definition requires legitimation. According to the deliberative model of democracy, the legitimation process must pass through a public sphere that has the capacity to foster considered public opinions. *Social power* depends on the status one occupies within a stratified society; such statuses are derived from positions within functional systems. Therefore, *economic power* is a special, yet dominant, kind of social power. It is not social power as such but rather its transformation into pressure on the political system that needs legitimation: It must not bypass the channels of the public sphere. The same can be said for the political impact of actors who arise from civil society, for example, general interest groups, religious communities, or social movements. These actors do not possess “power” in the strict sense but derive public influence from the “social” and



“cultural capital” they have accumulated in terms of visibility, prominence, reputation, or moral status.

The mass media constitute yet another source of power (Jarren & Donges, 2006, ff. 119, 329). *Media power* is based on the technology of mass communications. Those who work in the politically relevant sectors of the media system (i.e., reporters, columnists, editors, directors, producers, and publishers) cannot but exert power, because they select and process politically relevant content and thus intervene in both the formation of public opinions and the distribution of influential interests. The use of media power manifests itself in the choice of information and format, in the shape and style of programs, and in the effects of its diffusion—in agenda setting, or the priming and framing of issues (Callaghan & Schnell, 2005). From the viewpoint of democratic legitimacy, media power nevertheless remains “innocent” to the extent that journalists operate within a functionally specific and *self-regulating* media system. The relative independence of mass media from the political and the economic systems was a necessary precondition for the rise of what is now called “media society.” This is a quite recent achievement even in the West and does not reach back much further than the end of the Second World War (Jarren & Donges, 2006, ff. 26; Weisbrod, 2003). Functional “independence” means the “self-regulation” of the media system in accordance with its own normative code (Thompson, 1995, ff. 258).

In intermedia agenda setting, an informal hierarchy accords the national quality press the role of opinion leader. There is a spillover of political news and commentaries from prestigious newspapers and political magazines with nationwide circulation into the other media (Jarren & Donges, 2006). As far as input from the outside is concerned, politicians and political parties are, of course, by far the most important suppliers. They hold a strong position as regards negotiating privileged access to the media. However, even governments usually have no control over how the media then present and interpret their messages, over how political elites or wider publics receive them, or over how they respond to them (Jarren & Donges). Given the high level of organization and material resources, representatives of functional systems and special interest groups enjoy somewhat privileged access to the media, too. They are in a position to use professional techniques to transform social power into political muscle. Public interest groups and advocates tend likewise to employ corporate communications management methods. It follows that compared with politicians and lobbyists, the actors of civil society are in the weakest position.

Players on the virtual stage of the public sphere can be classified in terms of the power or “capital” they have at their disposal. The stratification of opportunities to transform power into public influence through the channels of mediated communication thus reveals a power structure. This power is constrained, however, by the peculiar reflexivity of a public sphere that allows *all* participants to reconsider what they perceive as public opinion. The common construct of public opinion certainly invites actors to intervene strategically in the public sphere. However, the unequal distribution of the means for such interventions does not necessarily distort the formation of considered public opinions. Strategic interventions in the public sphere

must, unless they run the risk of inefficiency, play by the rules of the game. And once the established rules constitute the right game—one that promises the generation of considered public opinions—then even the powerful actors will only contribute to the mobilization of relevant issues, facts, and arguments. However, for the rules of the right game to exist, two things must first be achieved: First, a self-regulating media system must maintain its independence vis-à-vis its environments while linking political communication in the public sphere with both civil society and the political center; second, an inclusive civil society must empower citizens to participate in and respond to a public discourse that, in turn, must not degenerate into a colonizing mode of communication.

The latter condition is troubling, to say the least. The literature on “public ignorance” paints a rather sobering portrait of the average citizen as a largely uninformed and disinterested person (Friedman, 2003; Somin, 1998; Weinsall, 2003). However, this picture has been changed by recent studies on the cognitive role of heuristics and information shortcuts in the development and consolidation of political orientations. They suggest that in the long term, readers, listeners, and viewers can definitely form reasonable attitudes toward public affairs, even unconsciously. They can build them by aggregating their often tacit and since forgotten reactions to casually received bits and pieces of information, which they had initially integrated into and evaluated against the background of evolving conceptual schemes: Thus, “people can be knowledgeable in their reasoning about their political choices without possessing a large body of knowledge about politics” (Dalton, 2006, ff. 26; Delli Carpini, 2004, ff. 412).

### Pathologies of political communication

In the final analysis, we are nevertheless confronted with the *prima facie* evidence that the kind of political communication we know from our so-called media society goes against the grain of the normative requirements of deliberative politics. However, the suggested empirical use of the deliberative model has a critical thrust: It enables us to read the contradicting data as indicators of *contingent* constraints that deserve serious inquiry. The aforementioned requirements—that is to say, the independence of a self-regulated media system and the right kind of feedback between mediated political communication and civil society—can serve as detectors for the discovery of specific causes for existing lacks of legitimacy.

As to the first condition, we must distinguish between an incomplete differentiation of the media system from its environments on the one hand and, on the other, a temporary interference with the independence of a media system that has already reached the level of self-regulation. The state monopoly that public broadcasting enjoyed in Italy during the first three decades of the postwar period is an example for the entanglement of electronic media in the political system. During a period when any change of government between the ruling Christian Democrats and the Communist opposition was blocked, each of the major parties enjoyed the privilege of

recruiting the personnel for one of three public television channels. This pattern granted a certain degree of pluralism but certainly did not ensure independence of professional programming. One consequence of this incomplete differentiation of mediated communication from the core of the political system was that public broadcasting indulged in a kind of paternalism, as if immature citizens needed due political instruction from on high (Padovani, 2005).

Compared with such a lack of differentiation, temporary dedifferentiation would seem to be a minor deficiency. Nevertheless, it sometimes has an even graver impact. A recent case in point is the manipulation of the American public by the White House's surprisingly successful communications management before and after the invasion of Iraq in 2003. What this case highlights is not the clever move by the president to frame the event of 9/11 as having triggered a "war on terrorism" (Entman, 2004). For the more remarkable phenomenon in this context was the absence of any effective counterframing (Artz & Kamalipour, 2005). A responsible press would have provided the popular media with more reliable news and alternative interpretations through channels of an intermedia agenda setting.

The lack of distance between the media and special interest groups is less spectacular but more frequent and "normal" than its transitory entanglement in the clutches of politics. If, for example, ecological or health insurance policies impact on the substantial interests of major corporations, concentrated efforts to translate economic power into political influence can be seen to have a measurable effect. In this context, the intermediary influence of scholarly communities (such as the Chicago School) is also worth mentioning. A special case of damage to editorial independence occurs when private owners of a media empire develop political ambitions and use their property-based power for acquiring political influence.

Private television and print media are commercial enterprises like any other. However, here owners can use their economic clout as a switch to *immediately* convert media power into public influence and political pressure. Alongside media tycoons such as Rupert Murdoch, Silvio Berlusconi is an infamous example. He first exploited the legal opportunities just described for political self-promotion and then, after taking over the reins of government, used his media empire to back dubious legislation in support of the consolidation of his private fortunes and political assets. In the course of this adventure, Berlusconi even succeeded in changing the media culture of his country, shifting it from a predominance of political education to an emphasis on marketing of depoliticized entertainment—"a mixture of films and telefilms, quiz and variety shows, cartoons and sports, with football preminent in this latter category" (Ginsborg, 2004).

The second condition concerns the feedback between a self-regulating media system and a responsive civil society. The political public sphere needs input from citizens who give voice to society's problems and who respond to the issues articulated in elite discourse. There are two major causes for a systematic lack of this kind of feedback loop. Social deprivation and cultural exclusion of citizens explain the selective access to and uneven participation in mediated communication, whereas

the colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives leads to a peculiar paralysis of civil society.

With regard to access and participation in mediated communication, it is sociological commonsense that the interest in public affairs and the use of the political media largely correlate with social status and cultural background (Delli Carpini, 2004, ff. 404; Verba, Scholzman, & Bradey, 1995). This set of data can be interpreted as indicating the insufficient functional differentiation of the political public sphere from the class structure of civil society. In the course of the past few decades, however, the ties to ascriptive social and cultural origins have been loosening (Dalton, 2006, ff. 172, 150, 219). The shift toward “issue voting” reveals the growing impact of public discourse on voting patterns and, more generally, of public discourse on the formation of “issue publics.” Although a larger number of people tend to take an interest in a larger number of issues, the overlap of issue publics may even serve to counter trends of fragmentation (Dalton, 2006, ff. 121, 206).

In spite of an inclusion of ever more citizens in the flows of mass communication, a comparison of recent studies arrives at an ambivalent, if not outright pessimistic, conclusion about the kind of impact mass communication has on the involvement of citizens in politics (Delli Carpini, 2004). Several findings in the United States support the “videomalaise” hypothesis according to which people who more extensively use the electronic media, and consider them an important source of information, have a lower level of trust in politics and are more likely to take a cynical attitude toward politics as a consequence (Lee, 2005, p. 421). If, however, reliance on radio and television fosters feelings of powerlessness, apathy, and indifference, we should not seek the explanation in the paralyzed state of civil society but in the content and formats of a degenerating kind of political communication itself. The data I have mentioned suggest that the very *mode* of mediated communication contributes independently to a diffuse alienation of citizens from politics (Boggs, 1997).

With regard to the colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives, what I have in mind here is simply the redefinition of politics in market categories. The rise of autonomous art and an independent political press since the late 18th century proves that the commercial organization and distribution of intellectual products do not necessarily induce the commodification of both the content and the modes of reception. Under the pressure of shareholders who thirst for higher revenues, it is the intrusion of the functional imperatives of the market economy into the “internal logic” of the production and presentation of messages that leads to the covert displacement of one category of communication by another: Issues of political discourse become assimilated into and absorbed by the modes and contents of entertainment. Besides personalization, the dramatization of events, the simplification of complex matters, and the vivid polarization of conflicts promote civic privatism and a mood of antipolitics.

The growing status of candidate images explains the pattern of candidate-centered electoral politics. Dalton explains, “candidates’ images can be seen as

commodities packaged by image makers who sway the public by emphasizing traits with special appeal to the voters” (Dalton, 2006, p. 215). The trend toward issue voting goes hand in hand with the trend toward candidate-based voting to the extent that the latter does not already predominate. The personalization of politics is bolstered by the commodification of programs. Private radio and television stations, which operate under the budget constraints of extensive advertising, are pioneering in this field. Though public broadcasting stations still maintain a different programming structure, they are in the process of adapting to or adopting the model of their private competitors (Jarren & Donges, 2006). Some authors consider the political journalism to which we are accustomed as a model that is being phased out. Its loss would rob us of the centerpiece of deliberative politics.

## Conclusions

These few examples illustrate how to make use of a communication model of deliberative politics for the interpretation of empirical findings. The model directs our attention specifically to those variables that explain failures in the maintenance of a self-regulating media system and of proper feedback between public sphere and civil society.

## Notes

- 1 This article is based on a plenary lecture given by the author on June 20, 2006, at the 56th Annual International Communication Association Conference, which took place in Dresden, Germany.
- 2 This conception of a detranscendentalized reason, the normative content of which is incorporated into social practices, must not be confused with John Rawls’ opposition of ideal and nonideal theory (cf. Neble, 2005).
- 3 Allow me in passing a remark on the Internet that counterbalances the seeming deficits that stem from the impersonal and asymmetrical character of broadcasting by reintroducing deliberative elements in electronic communication. The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. However, computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal *democratic* merits only for a special context: It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines. (A nice indicator for the critical function of such a parasitical role of online communication is the bill for €2088,00 that the anchor of *Bildblog.de* recently sent to the director of *Bild.T-Online* for “services”: The bloggers claimed they improved the work of

the editorial staff of the *Bildzeitung* with useful criticisms and corrections [cf. "Rechnung für Bild.de," 2006, p. 95]).

- 4 I am following the main lines of an analysis presented by Peters (1994, 2001).

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