Review of Habermas and the Media by Hartmut Wessler (Medford, MA: Polity, 2018)

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Abstract

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What is the role of Jürgen Habermas's critical theory amidst the prevalence of disinformation, polarization, and distrust in the media? In the book *Habermas and the Media*, Hartmut Wessler offers a "media lens" to make sense of Habermas's work. He makes a case for the relevance of Habermas's thought today, although his work needs to be updated to respond to developments in media studies and empirical political science.

The book is an invaluable resource to any reader looking for an introduction on Habermas's media theory. Its strongest point is its presentation of Habermas's work in a clear and concise manner. It presents Habermas's thinking chronologically, which is an effective way of walking readers through how Habermas's ideas about the media evolved over 40 or so years, although readers with more advanced knowledge of Habermas's work may find this approach uninteresting. The discussion covered Habermas's best-known books including *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) and *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984) as well as his little-known work such as *The Inclusion of the Other* (1998), the chapter "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere" in the book *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (1992) and the essays on Political Communication in Media Society published in *Communication Theory* (2006) and *Europe: The Faltering Project* (2009).

Wessler offers important clarifications on Habermas's conceptualization of the media. First, he reminds us that Habermas's theory has a measured take on what the media should do in normative terms, but also a recognition on what it does in empirical terms. Media must be free, diverse, and accessible to citizens in order to facilitate qualified opinion formation, which, in turn, shapes the political system's agenda. Wessler refers to this ideal as "deep media democracy." This ideal, however, is tempered by a recognition of realities. Wessler emphasizes Habermas's critique that the media is not always used to benefit democracy. Media tends to merge information and entertainment, break down complex situations into fragments, and obscure the political and economic power behind the news. Habermas sees mediated communication as not in itself deliberative, and neither should it be expected to be deliberative at all times. The challenge, argues Wessler, is to develop a "broader and more gradual conception of mediated deliberation" (p. 83). By this, he means disaggregating the components of mediated deliberation to measure the degrees of media's deliberativeness. He offers the criteria of inclusiveness, responsiveness, justification, and civility. With this set of criteria, Wessler argues that newspapers—not Twitter, not blogs—is where the strongest deliberative potential resides, for justification and civility are more prominent in this kind of media. This observation makes one wonder about the promise of online media as a suitable space for the flourishing of deliberative democracy.

One possible response to this line of inquiry lies in Wessler's second clarification, which is to place Habermas's work in conversation with recent developments in deliberative theory. Wessler unpacks the debate about how nondeliberative communication in media content can contribute to debates in the public sphere. Wessler argues that although Habermas refrains from discussing nondeliberative forms of media discourse, it is essential for those inspired by

Habermas's work to investigate how nondeliberative utterances like greetings, protests, satire, and public rituals contribute to large-scale deliberation and social learning. Here, Wessler offers a crucial intervention, not only in developing Habermasian media theory but also in unsettled debates on deliberative systems. Wessler proposes a media analysis that "neither marries nor divorces deliberation and non-deliberation" (p. 131). He rejects the view that deliberation should be "kept unpolluted by the toxins of non-deliberative forms of communication" (p. 131). Instead, he proposes a specific relation between nondeliberative media, on one hand, and genuine social debate, on the other. He calls this relation an "independent partnership" paradigm of Habermasian media analysis, where there is room to examine the deliberative potential of different forms of cultural production. This paradigm is useful for any deliberation or media studies scholar looking for a normative anchor in making sense of creative, subversive, and offensive content produced in the digital public sphere.

The final clarification Wessler offers that we find particularly relevant in current debates in deliberative theory is his discussion of emotions and their role in mediated public deliberation. Habermas is constantly criticized for overvaluing rationality over emotions. Wessler, however, shows that Habermas addresses moral feelings in a way closely related to moral judgment, engagement, and justification. Habermas's writings, he argues, "allow for more systematic research into the emotions underlying public discussion by directing analytical attention particularly to situations of moral disagreement as a source of emotional engagement" (p. 152). This discussion, among others, is an important feature of the book, which is to go to core questions of Habermasian thinking about the media, while engaging emerging debates in deliberative theory. Wessler does this in a number of instances, such as returning to Habermas's essays in 2009 that interrogates how mass media can intervene in diffuse circuits of communication in the public sphere, a seeming prescient theoretical question about today's problems of filter bubbles and group polarization.

In conclusion, we find *Habermas and the Media* as an important contribution in synthesizing the main aspects of Habermas's work in a clear and enlightening manner. This achievement is not to be taken for granted, especially for scholars who are not well-versed in reading Habermas in English or German. The book has a wide appeal for those who would like to deepen their understanding of Habermasian theory, but to those who have already mastered his work, they may find the book less innovative. It is undoubtedly an indispensable text for students and researchers in the fields of democratic and communication theories.

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