HABERMAS, MOUFFE AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

A CASE FOR THEORETICAL ECLECTICISM

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Abstract

Much of the research on communication and democracy continues to lean on Jürgen Habermas's work. However, many aspects of his approach have been intensely criticised in recent debates, both in communication studies and political theory. Habermas's emphasis on rational consensus as the aim of public communication has particularly been problematised. One of the most prominent critics, Chantal Mouffe and her agonistic model of democracy, have increasingly drawn the interest of media scholars. Mouffe explicitly contrasts the dominant Habermasian concept of the public sphere, and it appears that her model is impossible to combine with the Habermasian approach. But how substantial are the differences? What are the disagreements centred on? And what are their consequences for empirical media and communication research? In this article we argue that rather than accepting the standard readings or polar positions accredited to the two, we need to retain a certain "theoretical eclecticism" in combining normative theories with empirical research. Despite their controversies, we argue that both Habermas's and Mouffe's theories have value as critical perspectives that help us reflect on the ideals of democratic public communication.

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Introduction

Much research on the media and political communication tends to lean, often implicitly, on Jürgen Habermas's (1962/1989; 1984; 1987; 1992/1996) work on the public sphere and deliberative democracy. Yet, many aspects of Habermas's approach have been intensely contested in recent social and political theory, which has also raised doubts over its relevance in media and communication studies. One of the most controversial points is Habermas's focus on rational consensus as the ideal for communication in the public sphere. For many critics this not only remains a utopian, but even an undesirable ideal.

In many strands of media and communication studies, Habermas is read as defending an outdated and overtly pessimistic ideal of a unitary public sphere which has little relevance in contemporary societies. Critics have called for a "more catholic conception" of communication also "appreciative of its gloriously raucous" features (Peters 1993, 567), and suggested that Habermas' theoretical model is needlessly constrained by his emphasis on rational communication (Aksoy and Robins 2003, 373; Dahlgren 1995, 98; Jacka 2003). These readings are even coupled to personal descriptions. Habermas's use of rock concerts as an example of occasional publics compelled Ken Hirschkop (2004, 49) to comment: "Rock concerts? Habermas? I'm sure many people's first reaction, however trivial and foolish, was to wonder whether Professor Habermas had ever *been* to a rock concert." In light of the criticism, it is tempting to look for fresher alternatives.

One of the most prominent alternative approaches in recent democratic theory is provided by Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe and Laclau 1985; Mouffe 1993, 2000, 2005) in her critique of deliberative democracy. Mouffe's radical-pluralist theory of agonistic democracy places questions of power at the centre of politics, and points to collective passions as its driving force. Rather unsurprisingly, the approaches of Habermas and Mouffe are often considered to represent the opposite ends in contemporary political philosophy. The incommensurability of the two approaches is persistently stressed also by Mouffe herself (Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006; Moe 2006). But behind the contrasting rhetoric, are the two theoretical approaches really that oppositional? If so, how substantial are the differences? What are the disagreements centred on? And what are their consequences for empirical media and communication research?

We argue that there is a tendency within the field of media and communication studies to accept too readily these polarised readings. This is further emphasised by the fact that the two theorists have become popular within different strands of research. Habermas's public sphere thesis has served above all as a basis for attempts to connect political theory and critical political economy of communication (e.g. Garnham 1986; 1992; Scannell 1989). Mouffe's approach, in contrast, has been employed mainly as counter-narrative to the Habermasian approach, and scholars in media and cultural studies have used it to promote perspectives that take into account not only rational debate but also emotions, passions and identity (see Karppinen 2007). Consequently, their ideas have often become means to support other arguments in existing polemics.

In this article we question polarised readings and examine more closely their use as normative theories. We discuss the application of Mouffe's and Habermas's

theoretical approaches in media and communication studies with an aim to clarify their converging and diverging points. Despite clashing points of departure, we argue that rather than accentuating their incommensurability we should aim for dialectical engagement that perhaps even allows for combining their insights.

We first discuss the two approaches' fundamental starting points. This leads to our argument, based on two key issues for media and communication research: their normative power and their ideals for democratic communication. We then illustrate our argumentation by way of two examples: The first examines the theories' normative potential in macro-analyses of media policy, concerning particularly the uses of Habermas and Mouffe in understanding the societal role of public service broadcasting. The second case concerns the implications of the two theories for evaluating new deliberative arrangements set out to improve communication between citizens and politicians.

Differing Starting Points

As noted, Habermas's notion of the public sphere and his deliberative conception of democracy have dominated much recent theorising on the role of the media in democracy. Presenting her work as critique of this stand, Mouffe claims that civil society is not harmonious or unitary, but rather characterised by conflicts of interest and an irreducible pluralism of values. Consequently, the aims of deliberative democracy to generate rational consensus and social unity are seen as one-dimensional and necessarily exclusive.

A fundamental notion in Mouffe's theory is antagonism, the tendency to classify ourselves and others in terms of them and us. For Mouffe, trying to reconcile these tensions and conceive of the citizenry as a unified group ignores the inherent and unavoidable nature of pluralism and conflicts. Thus, Mouffe comes close to a kind of ontological atomism or perspectivism that resonates with theories of postmodernism. It suggests that we are trapped in our own imagined worlds and perspectives, and that there is no way we can fully understand other people, other groups and their claims. Habermas, in contrast, remains faithful to the ideals of Enlightenment and emphasises that we should at least try to break loose from our perspectives and strive for some kind of universal understanding or consensus. Even though he admits that such consensus is rarely reached, Habermas continues to insist that we must go on assuming that consensus is in principle possible for otherwise political disputes would degenerate into purely strategic struggles for power (Baumeister 2007, 488).

In a way, the tension between the two theorists reflects also the division of democratic theories into those oriented to democratising or rationalising the procedures of decision-making and those confined more explicitly to the processes of resistance and contestation as inherently valuable. As Bonnie Honig (1993, 2) writes, the radical-pluralist approach finds its justification above all as a critique of political theorists that measure their success by the elimination of dissonance and conflict. Instead of confining politics to the tasks of building consensus or consolidating communities and identities, the radical pluralist approach aims to shift the emphasis of democratic politics to the processes of dislocation, contestation and resistance. In line with this understanding, Mouffe's contribution too has often been used as a tool for criticising the flaws and biases of existing approaches, rather than for institutional proposals or solutions to concrete political questions.

There is no necessary reason, however, to treat these logics as fully incompatible. Instead we argue that they can be seen as two necessary perspectives to the democratisation of any social institutions. As Honig (1993, 205) notes, politics consists of practices of both settlement and unsettlement, and of both disruption and administration. Ultimately, these are perhaps best understood as co-existing impulses of political life, rather than as opposing ideologies. Therefore, we need to move beyond the polarities associated with Mouffe and Habermas and examine more closely the various modes of critique the theories enable.

Our first argument for challenging the thesis of incommensurability is based on the two theories' status as normative theories of democracy. We argue that the two approaches offer different modes of critique that may often be in contradiction. Still, they could both be used – even simultaneously – as perspectives that reveal problems and shortcomings in political and social reality.

Secondly, we aim to show that many of the polarised views of Habermas and Mouffe are arguably based on a rather simplified reading of current debates in democratic theory. Habermas's later work, for instance, can be seen as advocating a much more plural conception of public spheres than his critics would concede. Similarly, Mouffe is often accused of postmodern relativism that does not fully reflect her work. Instead of two radically different camps, much of the contemporary democratic theory would seem to converge in accepting a model of multiple and overlapping networks of publicity, within which different types of communication can take place. Hence, we argue that the public sphere is best understood as an arena of articulating expressions of both solidarity and difference, and in a general sense, this understanding is shared by both Mouffe and Habermas.

Normative Power

To understand the potential contribution of these kinds of theories for media and communication studies, we need to consider their status as normative theories. According to Seyla Benhabib (1986), political philosophy by its nature oscillates between the utopian and the empirical. Critical theory always involves a utopian element, commitment to the aims of emancipation, and autonomy of the rational subject. For Habermas, this commitment to critical theory and the project of Enlightenment has always been central as he attempts to create an emancipatory theory of society (Roderick 1986).

Mouffe, on the other hand, draws much of her inspiration from a sort of neo-Nietzschean, or postmodern scepticism towards the claims of rationalism and universalism. She sees her project as an attempt to accept and live with the illusionless condition of complexity, pluralism and contradiction (Mouffe 2000, 61). Yet she refutes accusations of nihilism and relativism often directed against postmodern and poststructuralist theory by emphasising *the political* as a distinct ethos that informs and enables an open-ended struggle for democratisation (Mouffe 1993, 145). For her, political philosophy does not assume a rational foundation for democracy, freedom or autonomy, but rather stresses that concepts and traditions are open to a plenitude of interpretations. The very role of philosophy is to offer such interpretations. Arguably, both approaches thus constitute a distinct normative and critical approach to politics.

To ground our argument for dialectical engagement that would countenance both kinds of theories, we can draw on Iris Marion Young's understanding of the role of critical theory. According to Young (2000), we can talk of critical theory as a general theoretical approach; meaning socially and historically situated normative analysis and argument. The theoretical aim of normative critical theory, then, is to construct accounts of ideals that articulate different feelings and render them to more systematic concepts. Ideals are not descriptions or blueprints that correspond to reality. Instead, they allow thinkers and actors to reflect on reality from a distance, reveal deficiencies in contemporary political arrangements and to envision alternative future possibilities.

From this perspective, we can start to understand both Habermas and Mouffe as contributions pointing to certain ideals. Neither offers a blueprint of the ideal world. Yet, both can reveal deficiencies and offer further alternative imaginaries or serve as interpretative hypotheses for analyses of everyday communication. Or, they may form the basis for new research questions, and help illuminate structures and relations hitherto obscured for the researcher (see Peters 1994, 70ff).

This also applies to empirical analyses of communication processes: the ideals do not only function to demonstrate that all communication is imperfect. Ricardo Blaug (1997, 108) argues that Habermas's theory lets us discuss the degree of imperfection, since the "fairness of an actual discourse is a matter of asymptotic approximation to the ideal." Our claim is that such a role is suitable also for Mouffe's approach. Both theories may contribute to "inform an analysis of particular political cultures, to ground a critique of democratic institutions and to reveal the(ir) normative content" (Blaug 1997, 111).

Public Communication: Consensus and Conflict

To further elaborate our argument, we focus on the tension between consensus and conflict as one key disagreement that separates Habermas's and Mouffe's theories. Models of deliberative democracy and the public sphere, in particular, have recently been increasingly criticised for overemphasising social unity and rational consensus. In the approaches informed by deliberative democracy, the role of the public sphere and public communication is conceptualised in terms of the public use of reason of free and equal citizens. It provides a norm of rational-critical deliberation, which is free from state and corporate interests, inclusive, aimed at understanding and agreement, reasoned, and reflexive (Benhabib 1996; Habermas 1992/1996). As certain social institutions evidently encourage this type of communication more than others, it thus provides an explicitly normative framework against which to assess them.

For many critics, however, this delivers an overtly rationalist conception of the public sphere which, despite claims that it makes room for difference, fails to adequately theorise pluralism and power. Drawing from theorists like Foucault and Lyotard, critics see that the deliberative emphasis on communicative reason leads inevitably to support the status quo in terms of existing exclusions and inequalities. This is because it fails to acknowledge the normalising tendencies involved in the designation of a particular form of communication as the rational, democratically legitimate norm (e.g. Fraser 1992; Villa 1992). The general thrust of deliberative democracy is thus seen as too dependent on the view that a benign social order must

be grounded in the ideal of consensus. While social reality is increasingly conceived as a chaotic situation of diversity and pluralism, the insistence on consensus is seen as too idealised, too unrealistic, and too academic (see Rescher 1993).

It is in that sense Mouffe (2000, 93) contests "the search for a final rational resolution." Instead, her model places questions of power at the centre of politics – thereby contrasting a concept of a public sphere where these processes ideally are eradicated. Since she sees civil society as characterised by conflicts of interest and an irreducible pluralism of values, any system of rational consensus is not only utopian, but also dangerous. Each consensus should therefore be taken as merely a passing result of a temporary hegemony or as a momentary stabilisation of power.

If the theories of deliberative democracy have essentially tried to ground the legitimacy of democracy on agreement among rational inquirers, Mouffe argues that:

> *The belief in the possibility of a universal rational consensus has put demo-cratic thinking on the wrong track. Instead of trying to design the institu-tions which, though supposedly "impartial" procedures, would reconcile all conflicting interests and values, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant "agonistic" public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted* (Mouffe 2005, 3).

The public sphere should thus provide channels for the expression of collective passions. It should allow for identification around clearly differentiated positions and the possibility of choosing between real alternatives. For Mouffe, the task of democratic politics, then, is not to remove passions from the public sphere. Rather, passions should be mobilised towards democratic designs.

Yet, despite the stark language, it can be argued that much of the criticism, Mouffe's work included, is based on a rather simplified reading of deliberative democracy and especially Habermas's later work. The latter can be seen as advocating a much more plural conception of public spheres (see Brady 2004, Dahlberg 2005). While consensus was a significant component of early deliberative theory, later contributions have significantly modified its role and deliberative democratic theory has moved beyond a purely reason-centred and consensus-oriented emphasis (Dryzek 2000, Young 2000, Mansbridge et al 2006). John Dryzek and Simon Niemeyer (2006), for instance, have proposed the concept of meta-consensus, which refers to agreement on the legitimacy of certain positions. In this version, we do not have to envision deliberating individuals as aiming for final agreement, as long as they acknowledge each other and the legitimacy of opinions that differ.

With this, Dryzek and Niemeyer are attempting to respond to criticisms directed against deliberative democracy. Interestingly, even though they start from diverging points of departures, they end up in a position not far from Mouffe's: While Mouffe argues for an agonistic democracy as a way for parties in conflict to live together without having to rely on violence, Dryzek and Niemeyer argue for deliberation between people accepting each other's colliding positions as legitimate.

In fact, many of the newer contributions to deliberative democracy now seem to agree on the need to move away from a unitary and consensual model of the public sphere. Seyla Benhabib, for instance, uses Hannah Arendt's concept of "en-

larged mentality" to refer to the broadening of horizons through coming to see the perspective of others in and through political and moral struggle (Benhabib 2002, 115, 142; 1992, 89-112). There is no presumption then that moral and political dialogues will produce normative consensus, yet it is assumed that even when they do not, the dialogues in the public sphere will articulate a civic perspective of enlarged mentality.

The revised understanding promotes not a unitary, but a pluralistic model, where public spheres are viewed as multiple and overlapping networks of publicity, within which different types of communication can take place. The public sphere is an arena of articulating expressions of both solidarity and difference, and in a general sense, this understanding is shared by both Mouffe and the revised versions of deliberative democracy.

The question is therefore not which one is the essence of democracy. Consensus and conflict are two co-existing impulses of political communication and political life in general. William Connolly (1991, 94) has underlined that humans are essentially incomplete without social form; a common language, institutional setting, set of traditions, and political forum for articulating public purposes are indispensable to the acquisition of an identity and the commonalities essential to life. But every form of social order also contains subjugations within it. Politics, then, is the medium through which these ambiguities can be engaged and confronted. It is a medium through which common purposes are crystallised, but also a medium through which they can be contested, exposed and unsettled (Connolly 1991, 94).

When framed in this manner, it can be argued that the differences between Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy and Mouffe's radical pluralist approach are more a matter of emphasis than a true ideological polarity. Contrary to some readings, neither Habermas nor Mouffe would embrace full consensus or unlimited pluralism. Not disregarding differences, we argue that an openness to potential combinations of the two approaches might have positive implications for media and communication research. We now turn to illustrate some of these by way of two empirical examples; concentrating on the normative founding for media policy, and our understanding of democratic interpersonal communication.

Implications for Media and Communication Research

In the following we test the eclectic attitude, outlined above, with two different cases. The first case concerns the uses of Habermas's and Mouffe's theories in understanding and formulating the societal role of public service broadcasting. The second case concerns the implications for assessing the workings of new arrangements set out to improve communication between citizens and politicians explicitly inspired by theories of deliberative democracy. While the first challenges the theories' normative potential in macro analyses of media policy, the latter mobilises the theories in micro analyses of face-to-face communication within formal political institutions. The two examples thus represent quite different contexts in the wide spectrum of media and communication research.

Public Service Broadcasting and Democracy

From the 1980s, Habermas's public sphere thesis unleashed a wealth of academic discussion, which in an exceptional way has brought together social and

political theorists and critical political economists of the media. The latter group mobilised the Habermasian public sphere approach as a normative backbone in debates on media structure and policy, and in particular, in defence of public service broadcasting (see Moe & Syvertsen forthcoming). In early-1980s Britain, Nicholas Garnham felt the Left merely provided "mealy-mouthed support" of public service broadcasting (Garnham 1986, 40). To change this, he sought to reformulate its value base by reaching for Habermas' concept of the public sphere. In Garnham's (1986, 41) reading of Habermas's early works, the public sphere was a "space for rational and universalistic politics." And precisely this rational potential was stressed in a defence of public service.

In effect, Garnham introduced public sphere theory to Anglophone broadcasting research. Several key works in the years that followed took a Habermasian approach to study issues of media and democracy (e.g. Blumler 1992; Garnham 1992; Keane 1991). Clearly, the contributions' insights advanced our understanding of relations between the media and democracy. They also entered very pertinent political debates, and counterbalanced the prevailing more cynical approach.

Yet, these studies are also problematic on several levels: first, they tended to portray public service broadcasting as the "institutional guarantor and instrument of the modern public sphere" (Collins 1992/2002, 66). Practices of public service broadcasting have historically never corresponded to the ideal public sphere. Nor do they automatically fit a future realisation or approximation. Second, especially early works by British scholars held the market and public service as incompatible principles of organisation: a market organisation of broadcasting was irreconcilable with democracy (see Collins 1992/2002, 69). Thirdly, the contributions in question built on Habermas' early public sphere theory, which carried with it some difficult biases – especially towards rationality (but see Dahlgren 1995).

In light of this, it might seem surprising that the implications of the agonistic model for the media have not been debated more often. In fact, it appears that the lack of institutional proposals or interest in concrete political questions is a rather general feature among the postmodern theorists of radical difference and pluralism (Dahlgren 2004, 15ff; McLennan, 1995, 85). These perspectives have thus been used more as oppositional discourses or tools in criticising various monisms, such as the rational bias, of media studies and critical political economy. They have not been mobilised as coherent normative theories pertaining to questions of media structure and policy.

In public service broadcasting research, this criticism further tends to linger with an early Habermasian ideal. Cultural studies scholar Elizabeth Jacka (2003) is a case in point, attacking a "modern" defence of public service, calling it unnecessarily pessimistic and one-dimensional. She focuses on Garnham's work, claiming it is based on an outdated and indefensible theoretical ideal of a unitary public sphere with little relevance in today's society. Jacka brings due attention to the dominant approach's prioritisation of "high modern" journalism, and corresponding neglect of fictional television forms. While it is important to question the devaluation of commercially funded providers' potential value in the public sphere, for our discussion, Jacka's argument suffers at two points.

First, as Garnham (2003) stresses in his reply, although newer contributions are referred to, the key works she addresses are almost 20 years old. And the theoretical ideals they build on are even older. As we have stressed, a Habermasian unitary

model of the public sphere has now been superseded by more comprehensive and fluid conceptualisations of the media and the public sphere. Clearly, considering what we have called sophisticated deliberative theory would at least somewhat diminish the power of Jacka's criticism.

Second, Jacka does not ascribe any normative power to Mouffe's theory. In fact, Jacka seems sceptical to any use of ideals when dealing with democracy. She objects to a notion of democracy as an "essence" (Jacka 2003, 181), and prefers to see it as "fluid and evolving" (Jacka 2003, 183). This is contrasted with an ideal view, which leads one to "inevitably see any departure from it as a crisis" (Jacka 2003, 183). However, we have argued that the theory of radical pluralism is just as normative as the deliberative ideals and that it also prescribes an ideal form of communication in the public sphere. Therefore, it is highly problematic to use Mouffe's contribution to support a dismissal of the value of normative ideals for media and communication research. Taking the normative potential seriously, on the other hand, opens up new possibilities for conceptualising the role of public service.

Certainly, public service broadcasting can be presented as the institutional space which is best able to realise the principles of communicative action in the public sphere: freedom from commercial pressures, undistorted communication, consensual procedures, rational debate and at least ideally the expression of social unity. Public service broadcasting can be lauded because it is envisioned as a neutral space responsive to the interests of all in society, where matters of the public good can be debated, considered and ideally agreed upon – striving to approximate a Habermasian ideal.

On the other hand, it is equally possible to defend the ideals of public service broadcasting by leaning on a radical pluralist theory of agonistic democracy. Geoffrey Craig (1999) offers a valuable step in this direction. Establishing that the Australian public service institution ABC exists in a state of perpetual crisis, he suggests embracing conflicts as the best defence: public service broadcasters should "generally provide spaces for, and in turn articulate, the ongoing 'crisis' which always constitutes the public life of a society" – a public life he finds "characterised by difference and incommensurability" (Craig 1999, 113, 112). Public service broadcasting is thus located within a heterogeneous public which rejects the erasure of difference occurring in the constitution of social unity. In a political and cultural environment which has promoted difference and pluralism, arguments for public service broadcasting need to consider more fully the issues of pluralism and conflict. Such an understanding of the democratic role of the media informed by an agonistic model of democracy provides an alternative to both the singular proliferation of private media outlets and the outmoded view of public broadcasting (Craig 1999, 112).

Craig's argument is explicitly located within an agonistic model of democracy, and according to him irreconcilable with a model of deliberative democracy. We claim that such a rejection is neither needed, nor desirable: it is possible to think of public service broadcasting as an arena for conflicting ideas and perspectives also from a deliberative approach. As we have argued, neither unity nor consensus is treated as a prerequisite in current deliberative theory. What the agonistic model contributes is the emphasis on exclusion as well as a richer understanding of the range of communication in the public sphere.

Public service broadcasting represents an institutional compromise that in many ways reflects the necessity to reconcile the needs for unity and difference. It can be understood as a media policy tool, employable for differently conceived functions based on different social and cultural aims. To theorise this role, we can profit from both Habermas's and Mouffe's contributions. They are resources for conceptualising the different functions media in general, and public service versions in particular, may have in a democratic polity. It makes no sense to look for equivalence in the institutional practice of public service broadcasting and some theoretical model of democratic theory. Rather, different critical normative theories should be seen as valuable for reflection on those institutions, their deficiencies, shortcomings and promises. For conceptualisations of media policy, there are therefore advantages in keeping an eclectic attitude towards the two theories. The same holds when we turn to consider a case for micro analysis of political face-to-face communication.

The Case of Civic Communication in a Swedish Municipality

Over the last decades, traditional political activities such as voting and joining political parties have declined (Thörn 2002). Citizens more frequently declare themselves to be dissatisfied (Bentivegna 2006). At the same time, they more often use other arenas than parliamentary institutions when engaging politically. In order to reckon with this trend, participatory democratic projects have been introduced in many countries (see Gastil & Levin 2005 on the US; He & Leib 2006 on China; Niemeyer 2004 on Australia; Kanra 2004 on Turkey; Vera-Zavala 2003 on Brazil). In these participatory projects, conversation and dialogue are often emphasised as both means and an end. To create dialogue between citizens and politicians is supposed to vitalise representative democracy (Friedman 2006). This emphasis on dialogue is broadly inspired by visions of deliberative democracy.

Such is also the case in Sweden, where the government has endorsed what they refer to as participatory democracy with deliberative qualities (Government bill 2001, 27). The idea heavily emphasises how democracy needs public arenas where opinions may be debated. As research has shown, terms like civic dialogue and civic influence are frequently used on Swedish municipalities' websites (Djörke 2006). Further, initiatives such as referendums, civic panels, and civic offices are becoming increasingly common in Swedish municipalities (SOU 2000). Early 2003, in the south Swedish municipality of Helsingborg (120,000 inhabitants), the majority of the Municipal Council decided to renew its organisation and install five Civic Committees in geographically defined areas of the city. The Civic Committees should foster participation and encourage dialogue between decision-makers and those affected by the decisions. For this purpose, the committees organised public meetings, workshops and deliberations for residents. The aim was to create a constructive and deliberative dialogue.

For the present discussion, we draw on a comprehensive study of how different civic positions constructed their activities within the Civic Committees (Svensson 2008b). We outline here some general findings and substantiate them by concentrating on examples from one meeting in a wealthy area in the northwest of the municipality. The meeting in question was organised with the local neighbourhood association to get an idea of the pertinent issues on the agenda in this particular neighbourhood. The idea was to discuss how the Civic Committee should continue

its work, and to discuss other activities in the neighbourhood. Nine members from the local neighbourhood association, three politicians from the committee, a handling officer and a coordinator from the municipal bureaucracy attended the meeting.

Our aim is to illustrate how both Mouffe and Habermas can be used as theoretical tools in communication research, not only in normative discussions on the macro level, but also on empirical research on the micro level. By studying the practices of these committees from both radical-pluralist and deliberative perspective, it is possible to assess their differences from an empirical point of view. Based on this, we argue that a combined analysis is possible, and even desirable. While the deliberative perspective is useful in identifying common purposes among the citizenry and how their different opinions may cohere, the agonistic perspective is useful in revealing mechanisms of power and hegemonic practices in the meetings organised by the Civic Committees.

Evaluating the practices of the Civic Committees from the perspective of agonistic democracy, the focus would be on whether minority groups were able to express themselves and challenge hegemony. Did the committees provide a channel for the expression of different and conflicting positions? Following Mouffe, the Civic Committees should not become a public fighting arena for different passions and groups in Helsingborg. Even though participants inevitably will disagree, they should conceive of each other as adversaries instead of enemies, and acknowledge each other's opinions as legitimate. This would be the normative ideal to strive for, and to and to use for reflecting on empirical reality in Helsingborg".

Clearly, the reality does not come close. Analysing the practices in Helsingborg from Mouffe's perspective there is a lot to be critical of. An initial general finding is that the open meetings arranged by the Civic Committees largely attracted middle-aged and old people, all mostly ethnic Swedes. This segment of the population was eloquent; they knew how to express themselves in a manner that attracted the approval of other participants, as well as politicians and municipal officials. Being able to express oneself in public appropriately, not being shy, and standing up for your opinions were important qualities sought in order to participate with success in the deliberations. Even though a majority of the participants were female, it was mostly the male participants that made themselves heard. In smaller group deliberations the ideal of equal participation was approximated to greater extent, even though strong male participants could take over even in smaller settings.

The failure to attract representative participation in the activities was considered problematic by the organisers. Therefore, some committees explicitly targeted young people and immigrants by visiting youth centres and immigrant associations. Further, in order to get a general picture of the issues at stake, a statistical survey was sent out to a representative sample of the inhabitants. What seems evident is that the organisation of the Civic Committees' activities from the outset was designed with the goal of rational deliberation in mind. Both the organisation of the meeting, and participant requirements could be seen as biased towards a form of communication criticised by the radical-pluralist perspective. Though the Civic Committees at least tried to reach minority groups in Helsingborg and counteract unrepresentative dominance of stronger citizens, they failed to realise a more fundamental problem: the very practices did contain mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, revealing hegemonic civic positions.

To reorient civic participation back to the municipal organisations, the Civic Committees believed that a deliberating citizenry was beneficial. Therefore, in order to facilitate deliberation, and position the participants as communicative, they explicitly stressed issues of future, everyday practices, unselfish and active engagement (see Svensson 2008b). For example when the Civic Committee visited the neighbourhood association in north-western Helsingborg, the handling officer started by presenting the Committees purpose to collect experiences of the citizens in different areas of the Helsingborg. She especially emphasised that they wanted to "catch the issues of the future so that the municipality can continue to work with these questions in new group constellations together with the citizens." This speech act reveals an ideal image of the citizen as active and involved. The handling officer implicitly underlined that the municipality was only interested in discussing broader issues of the future, issues in which the residents themselves could be involved in an active manner.

This positioning was important for how these residents conceived of themselves as citizens and what issues they felt they had the right to address. To engage actively in issues concerning the future of their everyday life, but not wanting to be considered too selfish, participants framed varied issues as pertaining to the welfare of their children (Svensson 2007). Almost all issues in the meeting in the northwest were addressed in a story line of being a parent. Obvious examples are building a bike path to a school in another residential area, reducing the speed in front of the school et cetera (Svensson 2007).

The relevance of parenthood in these practices did exclude couples with no kids, old people, gays and lesbians. The most apparent example of exclusion in the meeting concerned young people on the beach, playing loud music and getting drunk. One elderly lady complained about this and asked what the municipality could do about the problem. Other residents immediately told her that this was not a matter to discuss in a Civic Committee meeting – this was a matter for the police. The underlying story line here was that living close to the beach in summer time, you have to accept the young people having some fun. This contribution in the meeting was not in coherence with the prevailing story line of the active citizen, she was only complaining, and more importantly she was complaining about young people from a non-parent position. Consequently, the elderly lady's input was devalued. She remained quiet for the rest of the meeting.

While the practices in this particular meeting did not reach a standard of agonistic confrontation, contributions were repeatedly framed in conflicting ways. By using an agonistic pluralist framework we could start to discern a hegemonic civic position; being a parent. When someone tried to challenge "the parents" in the meeting, they were immediately quieted. This illustrates how Mouffe's perspective is useful in bringing attention to power mechanisms in the practices of the Civic Committees, and to how certain groups and their concerns were acknowledged to a greater extent than others.

From the perspective of deliberative democracy, the success of the Civic Committees would be assessed against the discussions' ability to approximate the ideal of rational deliberation, and whether participants in the meetings developed a greater understanding for each other (for a further discussion on this theme see Svensson 2008a). In deliberations, participants are not supposed to appear self-interested.

Ideas and demands must be inter-subjectively acceptable. Otherwise, neither consensus nor reasoned agreement and meta-consensus will be possible. This filtering of self-interest is what makes deliberative processes rational in a communicative sense. How then could we from this perspective assess the parent story line?

In the meeting, issues that were not obviously about children and being a parent were also addressed in the same dominant story line. For example, some residents argued for cleaning up the beach "so that the kids could play football." Some also wanted broadband in the neighbourhood so "the kids could do better on their homework." While such contributions surely could be seen to make use of inter-subjectively acceptable support, they could also be made subject of a more critical analysis. These claims could be understood as a way to "dress up" self-interests like property values in a publicly acceptable manner. Even though not always explicitly spelled out, property value was a common underlying argument for opposition towards for example opposing new housing projects and road development. The call for cleaning up the beach could be about private monetary motives, rather than the public welfare of the children in the neighbourhood. This is something deliberative theorists would consider incompatible with the ideal standards of deliberation. According to deliberative theory it is people's opinions that are supposed to change, not the way they present their arguments.

The advertising practices of the Civic Committees also revealed this tension between the more Habermasian communicative rationality, and a more instrumental understanding of civic participation. When trying to motivate participation in ads and leaflets, the Civic Committees often addressed the inhabitants in a very instrumental way by using phrases such as "Come and meet *your* politicians so *you* can tell them what *you* want" and "Make *your* voice heard." This did create contradictory expectations. On the one hand, the municipality attempted to get inhabitants to deliberate about political issues. On the other hand, inhabitants expected implementation of policies that were important for them on a more personal level. When officials and politicians reported back to the different municipal councils and committees on all the deliberating inhabitants that engaged in constructive dialogue, the inhabitants themselves had left the meeting expecting that something concrete would come out of their engagement. Attracting participation using an instrumental address did not create expectations compatible with the deliberative moral of mutual understanding and searching for the better argument.

The Civic Committees were explicitly inspired by deliberative democracy (see Svensson 2008a). Yet, scrutiny of how these committees addressed the inhabitants reveals a discrepancy between ideals and practices. In this sense, the theoretical framework of Habermas is useful in discussing how instrumental arguments may be disguised in a more legitimate manner, as well as highlighting contradictions in how the committees addressed citizens.

Drawing from the empirical case, we can now see more clearly the benefits of combining different theoretical approaches. While the radical-pluralist approach puts focus on recognising unequal relations of power and exclusionary mechanisms, focusing solely on the disagreements and contestations would not be to fully understand why inhabitants in Helsingborg have decided to engage in discussions with each other in the first place. On the other hand, focusing solely on the rational pursuit of understanding and consensus can imply ignoring the exclusionary prac-

tices in the deliberations. Of course, both Habermas's and Mouffe's theories operate on a level of abstraction that makes it difficult to apply them directly to empirical research. They offer no clear framework for empirical work, and they can both be used for critique on multiple levels; in revealing the problems of existing practices, in immanent critique of outspoken ideals, or in assessing the normative content of broader politics. From our perspective, this only confirms the validity of our proposed attitude. As we have argued, normative theories are more meaningfully used in the eclectic sense we have outlined above, as tools that allow us to reflect on reality from a distance and to imagine alternative possibilities, rather than as grand narratives that explain social reality in totality.

Conclusion

In this article we have made a case for certain theoretical eclecticism. Yet, more than generalising philosophical eclecticism we argue for dialectical engagement with recent developments in political theory that brings the approaches of Mouffe and Habermas closer. With a special focus on media and communication research, our two empirical examples illuminate that while the two approaches are not necessarily theoretically compatible, in empirical studies they can complement each other, both in microanalysis of interpersonal communication and in macro analysis concerning public service broadcasting and media policy.

With few exceptions like Habermas's (2006) recent essay *Political Communication in Media Society*, the focus of neither Habermas nor Mouffe has been on the media or communication as such. So it is up to communication and the media scholars to develop their ideas, apply them and possibly combine them. While we acknowledge the theoretical differences between the two and mean not to deflate them into mere theoretical rhetoric, our discussion also raises a more general question on the nature and uses of normative political theory in media and communication research. Instead of a dogmatic confrontation, we argue for an attitude of theoretical eclecticism where the role of critical theoretical reflection is more to raise questions and open new analytical and normative perspectives than to offer definite answers.

In this sense, Habermas's massive work has obviously been important in raising critical questions and formulating conceptualisations of ideal conditions of public deliberation in media and communication studies. And as we have argued, it is largely around his concepts that most fruitful coming together of political philosophy and media studies has so far taken place. Mouffe, on the other hand, has brought attention to ignored sides of political communication and the democratic role of the media. In many ways, her critical approach can help reveal the deficiencies and biases of existing theoretical frameworks for understanding contemporary problems.

In this article we have focused particularly on the themes of consensus and conflict. Yet, there are many other areas where the taken-for-granted incommensurability of different strands of democratic theory could be reconsidered. The role of various kinds of expressive performances and ritualised encounters could constitute a key issue to take up when exploring these areas: How, for instance, can we conceptualise and assess the political function of communication that is neither public deliberation, nor agonistic confrontation? Such themes include, but are not limited to, the idea of a cultural public sphere (McGuigan 2005); storytell-

ing, rhetoric and greeting as modes of political communication (Young 1996); or cultural governance as a concept in which different and divergent expressive forms and their impact on political life are considered (Bang 2003).

Without ignoring the differences between Mouffe and Habermas, we argue that there is no need to choose any one theoretical approach, and pretend that it offers an end-all account of the nature of social and political reality. Normative theories can be seen as ideational resources rather than fixed approaches that prescribe a rigid normative criteria or description of reality. Therefore, we need to continually engage with political theory of different orientations in an eclectic manner to test our normative assumptions.

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