Media, Culture, and Civil Society

Médias, culture et société civile

Ronald N. Jacobs

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/10519>

DOI: 10.4000/questionsdecommunication.10519

ISSN: 2259-8901

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Lorraine

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 June 2016

Number of pages: 379-393

ISBN: 9782814302839

ISSN: 1633-5961

Electronic reference

Ronald N. Jacobs, « Media, Culture, and Civil Society », *Questions de communication* [Online], 29 | 2016, Online since 30 June 2018, connection on 31 July 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/10519> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.10519>

RONALD N. JACOBS

University at Albany, State University of New York

USA-NY 12222

rjacobs@albany.edu

MEDIA, CULTURE, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Abstract. — Ronald N. Jacobs is Professor of Sociology at the University at Albany, State University of New York. He is co-editor of the *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* (Center for Cultural Sociology, Yale University). His research covers a wide terrain, ranging from studies of the social organization of the television news room, the history of African-American media, the differences between African-American and "mainstream" news coverage of racial crisis, the history and organization of opinion media, the relationship between news and entertainment media, and the cross-national comparison of different media systems. In this text, Ronald N. Jacobs describes four main premises that underlie his work: the symbolic dimensions of public arenas; the existence of multiple, overlapping publics; the role of media organizations; the importance of identities.

Keywords. — public sphere, "Strong Program" in Cultural Sociology, media formats and organizations, identities, entertainment media, African-American media Ronald N. Jacobs, Média, culture et société civile

Ronald N. Jacobs, Médias, culture et société civile

Résumé. — Ronald N. Jacobs est professeur de sociologie, spécialiste des médias, à l'Université d'État de New York à Albany (États-Unis), et co-directeur de la revue *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* éditée au Centre de sociologie culturelle à l'université Yale. Il s'intéresse aux médias afro-américains, à l'organisation sociale du secteur de la production de l'information, à la couverture médiatique des questions « raciales », à la question de la réception, à la relation entre information et divertissement, à la géopolitique du système médiatique. Dans cet article, Ronald N. Jacobs s'arrête sur quatre postulats qui fondent ses analyses : l'importance du symbolique, dans ses diverses dimensions (narrative, esthétique, etc.) ; la multitude des espaces publics ; le rôle des formats médiatiques et des enjeux organisationnels qui les sous-tendent ; la question des appartenances identitaires.

Mots clés. — espaces publics, « programme fort » en sociologie culturelle, formats et organisations médiatiques, appartenances identitaires, information et divertissement, médias afro-américains

I have spent the last 20 years studying media, culture, and civil society. Empirically, my research has covered a wide terrain, ranging from studies of the social organization of the television news room, the history of African-American media, the differences between African-American and “mainstream” news coverage of racial crisis, the history and organization of opinion media, the relationship between news and entertainment media, and the cross-national comparison of different media systems. In all of these empirical areas, I have tried to maintain a fruitful dialogue with classical and contemporary theories of democracy and civic life.

Theoretically, what holds my work together is a sustained interest in understanding the relationship between media and the public sphere. The concept of the public sphere informs some of the most important debates in theories of democracy and civil society. Referring to a particular type of communicative practice – the practice of open discussion about matters of common public concern – the concept owes much of its academic popularity to Jürgen Habermas, and the publication of his now-classic *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962). Jürgen Habermas (ibid.) argued that the creation of the public sphere was a crucial event in the history of democracy, because it led for the first time to the “people’s public use of their reason”. Claiming the space of public discourse from state regulation, and demanding that the state engage them in debate about matters of common concern, private citizens successfully campaigned to replace the dominant political practice of parliamentary secrecy with a new principle of open public discussion. Newspapers were at the center of this battle, as journalists fought for an official place in the House of Parliament, and as opposition parties realized that they could use political journalism to mobilize public opinion.

While my work has been deeply influenced by Jürgen Habermas’s normative historical sociology of civil society, it is also informed by Jeffrey C. Alexander’s (1998) insistence that we study “real civil societies”. In other words, taking an approach that is different from political theory, I do not begin with a normative commitment to a particular vision of democratic life, and then try to measure the extent to which actual societies fail to meet these deductively-generated normative visions. Instead, my research begins with civil societies as they actually exist – partial, multiple, hybrid and contradictory spaces of communication. Real civil societies produce inclusion as well as exclusion, solidarity as well as conflict, trauma as well as civil repair. Beginning from these premises requires a different set of empirical strategies.

In what follows, I describe the four main analytical strategies I use to study real civil societies, expanding upon each by reviewing some of the research that I have done, along with my research team at the University at Albany. The first strategy is to re-think how communication actually operates in the public sphere. The second strategy is to recognize that important public issues are interpreted and debated in multiple, overlapping publics. The third strategy is to consider the ways in which public communication is organized in and through specific media organizations. The fourth and final strategy is to recognize that people do not only act in the public sphere as citizens, but that their actions are informed by other identities as well.

Communication and culture in the public sphere

One of cultural sociology's central contributions is its development of a more meaning-centered theory of civil society and the public sphere. Most other approaches to the question of civil society and public discourse tend to emphasize the normative importance of critical rationality (Habermas, 1962; 1996), autonomy (Fraser, 1992), inclusion (Young, 2000), deliberation (Benhabib, 2002), and generalized trust (Putnam, 2000). To be sure, all of these are important principles, and they inform the idealized images that most civil societies paint for themselves. But this is an incomplete representation of how "real civil societies" actually operate in practice. By treating these principles only as normative ideals, we miss the way that they are part of a larger "discourse of civil society," based on binary principles of purity and pollution.

Rather than evaluating how well real civil societies match up to idealized principles, cultural sociology has chosen to study the discourses of civil societies themselves. In studies of war (Smith, 2005), race (Jacobs, 2000; Alexander, 2006), religion (Alexander, 2006; Lichterman, 2005), and democratization (Ku, 1999; Baiocchi, 2006), cultural sociologists have demonstrated that civic virtues are only made meaningful through the symbolic identification of civic vices. Furthermore, because civil ideals are always part of a larger semiotic system, they can be used either to open or to close the public sphere. Rationality can be deployed as an ideal to be strived for, or it can be used as a symbolic weapon to exclude from the public sphere those who are considered to lack sufficiently rational qualities. Trust can be used to create solidarity and intersubjectivity, or it can be used to symbolically pollute and exclude those who are seen as cynical, self-interested, and distrustful.

The point is that the public sphere is not an arena of rational deliberation, but rather it is a site of symbolic creation and contestation. Furthermore, there is an aesthetic dimension to all public discourse. Actors in civil society do not simply make arguments in the public sphere and then wait to see whether their arguments are the most rational or the most convincing. If they have any communication skills at all, they will have developed their arguments by relying on existing cultural styles, traditional narrative forms, and well-known character types to express and authorize their arguments. And these arguments will include specific types of cultural performances, where civic actors try to convince a (typically mediated) public audience that they are authentically committed to the greater public good. There is still a kind of public deliberation here, but it involves much more than a critical debate about the propositional content of competing arguments. It also involves the attempt to develop a shared understanding – developed through cooperative as well as competitive processes – of the dramatic and aesthetic dimensions that surround the issues of the day.

In my own work – and together with Jeffrey C. Alexander, Philip Smith and other scholars affiliated with the "Strong Program of Cultural Sociology" – I have studied the aesthetic dimensions of public discourse by using the concepts of narrative, code, and performance. The concept of code comes from the semiotics of

Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes, and emphasizes how meaning develops through patterned relationships of similarity and difference. For real civil societies, this means that there are no spaces of complete inclusion or complete solidarity, because the meaning of these terms already invokes a set of objects that are to be excluded and rejected. Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith (1993) explored this in an early article on the “discourse of civil society”, and Jeffrey C. Alexander (2006) develops the theoretical consequences of this insight in further detail in his magnum opus, *The Civil Sphere*.

In my own empirical research, I made the turn to narrative in the early 1990s. Through a close reading of Northrup Frye and Paul Ricoeur, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Philip Smith and I (along with another colleague, Steve Sherwood) had begun to think about the possibility of developing a “structural hermeneutics” in which narrative plays a central role. Our starting point was the idea that people understand themselves and the world around them by placing events into stories, which have a beginning, a middle, and an end. These stories have an intelligible structure, the mapping of which is a central project for cultural sociologists.

I first began to see the power of narrative while doing ethnographic research at a television news station in Los Angeles. In that research, which was published in a 1996 article in *Media, Culture and Society*, I saw how the world of news was organized through stories (Jacobs, 1996a). Events are perceived as newsworthy when they are recognized as plot elements in a story. They are legitimated as newsworthy through stories told to the news director. They are researched for purposes of plot and character development. They are read by news anchors whose tone of voice and facial expressions are rehearsed and then staged in order to naturalize the sense of the story being conveyed (crisis, tragedy, contest, comedy, etc.). Even the news broadcast has a narrative structure, with the most serious stories coming first and the most humorous ones coming last. I argued that the narrative organization of the news is an important cultural resource for journalists, allowing them to sift through the vast amounts of information coming into the news room in an efficient and effective way that allows them to meet their deadlines. The use of narrative to sort events into potential stories is not limited to news work, though. Rather, it is a general cultural process that shapes all forms of social action.

Influenced by Northrup Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*, Philip Smith and I began to think about how we might identify a limited number of features that were common to all narratives, and which could be used fruitfully for cultural analysis. Ultimately, we settled on the features of plot, character, and genre. Plot refers to the selection, evaluation, and ordering of events into a story. Character refers to the description of different actors in the story, as well as to the relationships between them. Genre refers to different types of stories (e.g., romance, tragedy, comedy, irony), which help audiences to develop shared expectations about how the plot will develop and what will happen to the different characters in the story.

Applying these conceptual tools to the study of racial crisis, I spent most of the 1990s comparing African-American and “mainstream” public discourse about racial crisis. In a 1996 article published in *American Journal of Sociology*, and then more extensively in my book *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society* (Jacobs, 1996b; 2000), I discovered key differences in the kinds of narratives that were used to interpret racial crisis. In the “mainstream” publics, represented by majority newspapers, events of police violence against African-Americans were emplotted as the first event in a new narrative of crisis. These stories linked police brutality and political division, and they were structured such that they would come to a successful resolution with the release of an official commission report in which people could expect political unification and greater police effectiveness. In the African-American public sphere, by contrast, police violence was emplotted as part of an ongoing narrative about racism and civil rights, which merely continued a long pattern of police violence and white insincerity. In this narrative, the release of an official commission report was greeted with suspicion rather than celebration, and the anticipated resolution of the crisis was withheld until some future date when there would be real African-American empowerment. These different narratives had profound consequences for the city of Los Angeles, helping to explain the disbelief of white citizens and the rage of African-Americans in the face of the not-guilty verdicts against the police officers charged in the 1991 beating of Rodney King.

In later work, I developed a theory about the narrative foundations of public policy. Working with Sarah Sobieraj (Jacobs, Sobieraj, 2007), I looked at the way that politicians draw on specific types of narratives in order to connect the policies they are proposing, the needs of the public, and their own needs for legitimacy. Politicians are drawn to policy narratives in which they themselves occupy the central and heroic character position, and where they are able to protect the scope of their jurisdictional authority. I argued that the narrative aspects of political debate are a central component of the policy-making process, because they link cultural and political interests in a way that involves the mastery of cultural structure as well as the creativity of cultural performance.

I have explored the creative practices of cultural performance in a more sustained manner in recent work, and most notably in research on opinion media that I have undertaken in collaboration with Eleanor Townsley (Jacobs, Townsley, 2011). I discuss this work in more detail later in the article, but for now I want to point out that the most influential figures of the political public sphere – the people we refer to as “media intellectuals” – are masters of cultural performance. These media intellectuals certainly use rational argument and the presentation of evidence, but they also include more playful forms of argument such as the clever use of dramatic techniques to place moral conflict into bold (and usually overstated) relief, the careful cuing of recognizable genres, and the elaborate identification of contemporary public figures with mythic archetypes.

The central conclusion from all of this work is that the debates taking place in the public sphere involve a lot more than the search for a truly rational consensus. As cultural sociologists, Jeffrey C. Alexander, Philip Smith and I have resisted the urge to denounce non-rational communication. Instead, we have focused on the full spectrum of public sphere communication, with the goal of providing a map of how the different types of communication are held together through an intelligible system of meaning structures. The result is a more cultural theory of the public sphere.

Multiple and overlapping publics

The dominant theory of the public sphere is substantially different today that it was when it was introduced more than fifty years ago by Jürgen Habermas. Envisioning the public sphere primarily as a political space that could help challenge, engage, and regulate public authorities, Habermas emphasized face-to-face communication, rational-critical discourse, and a single public arena. I have already outlined the problems associated with an emphasis on rational-critical discourse, and argued instead for an approach that pays more attention to semiotics, narrative, and performance. I now turn my attention to the theoretical problems that result from Habermas's emphasis on a single public sphere.

If it was only that Jürgen Habermas had neglected to consider the non-bourgeois, non-dominant, and more identity-oriented public spheres, the argument for multiple publics would not present such a fundamental challenge, because recognition of these other publics would simply provide a more detailed picture of a more differentiated civil society. But the challenge of multiple publics is more fundamental than this, because it suggests that civil society has a fractured quality which is not being overcome by some trend toward an integrated public sphere. Jürgen Habermas (1992: 425) admitted as much in a 1989 conference, writing that "a different picture emerges if *from the beginning* one admits the coexistence of competing public spheres and takes account of the dynamics of those processes of communication that are excluded from the dominant public sphere."

As I showed in *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society*, African-American history presents a strong case for the reality and the political importance of separate public spheres. Separate public spaces and communicative institutions formed among Northern free blacks in the 1700s: prominent examples included the African Union Society of Newport, Rhode Island (1780), the Free African Society of Philadelphia (1787), the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Bethel Charity School, and the African Free School Number 2. From these separate spaces of public communication came the black press, which was established in 1827. At least forty different black newspapers were published before the Civil War, and the establishment of a national black press was generally agreed upon as the second most pressing issue among African-American leaders.

The history of the African-American public sphere and the black press is neither an isolated nor an exceptional case; numerous historical studies point to the existence of non-bourgeois, non-male, and otherwise “non-official” publics. As early as the eighteenth century, there were plebian publics, women’s publics, and an entire set of public spheres which were organized more around “festive communication” than rational discourse (Eley, 1992; Ryan, 1992). During the women’s suffrage movement of the nineteenth century, there developed national, regional and local women’s papers simultaneously articulating the principles of women’s rights and the vision of a new kind of media organization. The working class press at the turn of the century consisted of hundreds of newspapers in dozens of languages. What these alternative publics and alternative media point to, according to historians such as Geoff Eley (1992 : 307), is the fact that Jürgen Habermas’s account of the rise of the bourgeois public sphere “is an extremely idealized abstraction from the political cultures that actually took shape at the end of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth century.” Real civil societies have always contained plural and partial publics.

Once we accept the realization that there are multiple and overlapping publics, then we can focus our energy on comparing different concrete publics. We can measure the extent to which they overlap with one another, and we can explore how the dynamics of power and influence get embedded within specific, concrete publics. This was one of the most important empirical questions that my book *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society* addresses. But it is also a useful way to think about globalization and the public sphere. In other words, instead of assuming that globalization leads to a single communicative space, the focus on multiple publics encourages us to examine the extent to which different national and transnational publics overlap with one another. For example, in research I am doing at the moment with Muyang Li, we are comparing how China’s Internet privacy policy gets discussed and narrated in different newspapers around the world. In research I am pursuing with Haoyue Li, we are comparing how the China’s air pollution crisis is narrated in different newspapers, civil society organizations, and scientific organizations around the world. In both projects, we can see how the Chinese State’s attempt to create a successful narrative of legitimacy requires careful attention to different national and transnational publics.

Media and the public sphere

When we study and compare actually-existing public spheres, we are quickly faced with the reality that the discourse of civil society is always filtered through specific types of media organizations. These media organizations may be committed to improving citizenship, but they are also committed to being commercially and creatively successful. In order to pursue a sociology of real civil societies, we must also pursue a sociology of media.

While my early research in media sociology focused on journalism, my more recent work has tried to think about the ways in which concrete public spheres include more than just objective journalism. In particular, I have explored two types of media genres that have an outsized influence on the larger media field: (1) opinion media and (2) entertainment media. Each of these media genres is different from objective journalism in crucial ways, and it is important to understand these differences if we want to have an adequate understanding of public communication and influence.

Despite the growing power of objective journalism in the US throughout the 20th century, real civil societies have continued to organize themselves into multiple and partisan publics, and they have done this largely by mobilizing and diversifying the genres of opinion media. In fact, opinion media in the US have grown dramatically in size and influence since the 1970s. Newspapers have expanded their op-ed pages, and added interactive Internet features that allow their readers to circulate, discuss and comment on the columns appearing in the paper. Political talk radio fills the airwaves, while cable television news channels continue to add new political talk programs, particularly during the prime-time hours. The Internet “blogosphere” is expanding at an exponential rate too, providing yet another space for the leading commentators to interpret the meaning of the day’s events. And all of these spaces of opinion are interconnected through forms of multi-media synergy that operate at different levels of scale and with different degrees of conscious coordination.

The growth of partisan media is now a well-recognized trend in American media. A “conservative media establishment” (Jamieson, Cappella, 2008) formed in the 1990s, and a left-leaning media establishment formed in the first decade of the 21st century (Jacobs, Townsley, 2011). In both of these trends, opinionated media genres have become dominant, and objective journalism plays a supporting role. In order to understand the political publics in the US today, we need to understand how these opinion media are structured.

The Space of Opinion

The Space of Opinion. Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere (Jacobs, Townsley, 2011) introduces the concept of the space of opinion as a way of conceptualizing the role of opinion in contemporary democracies. A distinct social space with its own history and cultural logic, the space of opinion is located at the chaotic intersection of the journalistic, the political and the academic fields. The book develops a new theoretical model for understanding the role of media opinion in democratic deliberation. It also traces the history of the space of opinion, chronicling the rise to influence of newspaper columnists and televised political talk programs.

Empirically, *The Space of Opinion* is based on a large sample of opinion collected from newspapers and television shows during the first years of the Clinton (1992-1993) and Bush (2000-2001) presidential administrations. We also collected

biographical data on authors of opinion to connect specific argument styles to specific types of authors, and to examine the distribution of authors and argument types across different formats. The result is a close mapping that reveals a massive expansion and differentiation of the opinion space. It tells a complex story of shifting intersections between journalism, politics, the academy, and the new sector of think tanks. It also reveals a proliferation of genres and forms of opinion; not only have the people who speak within the space of opinion become more diverse over time, but the formats of opinion – claims to authority, styles of speech, and modes of addressing publics – have also become more varied.

While the book documents many important changes in the space of opinion, it also finds continuities. Despite public anxieties, the project of objective journalism still exists, particularly in the older, more traditional formats. If anything, the proliferation of newer formats has resulted in an intensified commitment (by some) to core journalistic values as clear points of difference that offer competing logics of distinction and professional justification. But the current moment does represent a real challenge as innovative new media formats compete to narrate politics in the most compelling, authoritative, and influential manner.

As different opinion media compete to capture their audience and to exert influence in political society, they have developed new communicative innovations at a dizzying pace, pushing in a direction increasingly unrecognizable by the standards of traditional journalism. These newer opinion formats are clearly committed to the politicization of the public conversation, in a way that is much less obvious in traditional journalism. This commitment to partisanship and politicization clearly violates any presumption of objectivity which depends on a lack of bias – a presumption that underpins not only professional journalism, but also related intellectual fields like science and the academy. By emphasizing political disagreements and moral certainties, the newer formats are more likely to encourage reductive interpretations of public issues. And it seems unlikely that these newer programs are encouraging anyone to change their opinion about an issue, as a result of the force of the better argument. In short, there is no deliberation on these programs, except among speakers and viewers who already share a common political identification, and who are already in full agreement on the issues. To the extent that mediated deliberation is occurring in these new formats, it is a deliberation among allies, rather than a deliberation across points of difference.

In certain important respects, the newer formats appear to be reducing the deliberative capacity of the space of opinion. For example, while the new formats have certainly increased the presence of certain voices and perspectives (e.g., partisan hosts, think tank intellectuals, binary moral narratives), they have discouraged others (academics, narratives emphasizing historical complexity or unintended consequences). This creates problems for the space of opinion, if one believes that complexity improves the quality of deliberation. As our research has demonstrated quite clearly, the presence of academics has a clear and positive role in adding depth and complexity to the discussions that take place in the space of opinion. There

are other problems as well. As we have already suggested, the new formats have increased an awareness of other public conversations, but they have often done so through narratives of political partisanship and moral vilification that make trust-based dialogue and hermeneutic sensitivity more difficult to achieve. Because most theories of deliberation prefer trust and openness over partisanship and moral pollution, these trends are cause for concern.

Ultimately, we argue, the depth of this concern depends on the impact that the newer formats are having on the entire space of opinion. The traditional journalistic formats introduce a distinctive set of voices and cultural styles that are not found in the newer opinion formats. While these traditional formats have not yet shown signs of weakening, it is possible in the future that the cultural styles preferred in the newer formats will begin to achieve hegemony over the larger space of opinion, as the regular voices and the preferred styles of the new formats begin to assert themselves in other parts of the space of opinion. It is also possible that the increasing strength of the newer formats could crowd out other "alternative" formats that have been important sources of innovation in the past. Historically, many of the innovations in media came from small, alternative, and independent sources, such as the small opinion magazines, the alternative weeklies, and the programs originating from public broadcast media have all contributed important innovations to the space of opinion. Today, the innovations are coming almost exclusively from the big multi-media conglomerates. In this context, we suggest, media intellectuals who seek to defend traditional journalistic virtues need to identify their own enemies in the world of punditry, and to clearly justify their own vision of what news and opinion should look like. In the absence of this kind of vigorous defense, there is a risk that the partisan publics will achieve hegemony over civil society. Continued empirical research is needed to understand the relationship between the newer opinion-based media publics and the older formats of traditional journalism.

Entertainment media

Research on actually-existing civil societies also needs to confront the fact that the field of media is dominated by entertainment rather than by news. Media conglomerates make most of their money in the entertainment genres, and most audiences spend significantly more time engaged with entertainment media than they do with news media. It does not make sense to simply denounce the interest in entertainment for pulling people's attention away from matters deemed more serious. A more useful strategy – and consistent with the research approach I have been advocating – is to think about how entertainment and entertainment media are incorporated into public discussions about matters of common concern.

In my own work, I have introduced the concept of the "aesthetic public sphere" as the best way for cultural sociologists to understand the civic impact of entertainment media. The idea of the aesthetic public sphere builds from Jürgen Habermas' discussion

of the literary public sphere but pushes it in a more cultural and historically even-handed direction. In the first half of his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1962) noted the important connection between entertainment media and the development of democratic communication norms. His specific focus was on the novel and the set of communicative institutions that developed around it. At the level of the social imaginary, the novels that bourgeois families were reading in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries worked to sentimentalize the intimate sphere of the family, communicating to the reading public the values of empathy and understanding (ibid.: 50). The bourgeois novel was also linked to the creation of a literary public sphere, which “was established as a sphere of criticism of public authority [...] already equipped with institutions of the public and with forums for discussion” (ibid.: 51). The creation of these public, impersonal mass forums was centrally important for separating the content of an argument from the status of the speaker. And, eventually, the infrastructure and the logic of the literary public sphere were extended to the political realm, leading to the democratic principles of publicity and critical rationality.

Unfortunately, Jürgen Habermas’ public sphere theory developed in a way that undercut his earlier sensitivity to entertainment media and prevented a usable theory of an aesthetic public sphere from gaining any intellectual influence. The first problem is that Habermas was never able to imagine how entertainment media might serve any useful purpose other than to form a sort of proto-public sphere. The orientation to intersubjectivity, the development of critical literary forums, the separation of speaker and argument – all of these created the conditions for the principles of publicity and critical rationality, and nothing more. Furthermore, once these principles had been institutionalized within a relatively autonomous political public sphere, then the civic contributions of entertainment media were no longer needed. In other words, even in the best-case scenario, Habermas never imagined that entertainment media would have a civic value that was more than fleeting, temporary, and subsidiary.

Furthermore, because Jürgen Habermas failed to see how civil society consists of multiple and overlapping publics (often organized through quite distinct media genres), he failed to recognize the many ways that entertainment and news are part of the same intertextual environment. Rather than imagining a world of “serious” texts and a world of “popular” texts, in which each world is an island unto itself, an emphasis on intertextuality comes with the recognition that these two worlds are continually self-referencing. For example, as Robert Park (1938) noted in a series of early essays, the modern newspaper did not invent its distinctive cultural forms *ex nihilo*, but rather borrowed from fiction and other dramatic forms in a way that made the cultural structure of the news story and the fiction story very similar. In fact, Park (ibid.: 204) argued that a good deal of what was printed in the newspaper – most notably, the human-interest story – was read by its audience as if it was literature, in the sense that it was read to stir the imagination rather than to focus public discussion or public action. The same was

true of many breaking news stories, which tended to be written and read as if they were “realistic literature like the ‘true stories’ of the popular magazines and of the earlier ballads that preceded them in the history of the newspaper” (Park, 1941: 374-375). Park was also attentive to the ways that literature was being shaped by the existence of the newspaper, in its choice of subject matter as well as in its use of specific poetic techniques. Thus, as Robert Park (1940: 686) commented, “Emile Zola’s novels were essentially reports upon contemporary manners in France just as Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* has been described as an epoch-making report on the share-cropper in the United States.”

The point is that readers and viewers do not join a serious, civic, interpretive community when dealing with factual news media, or a trivializing, escapist one when they are interacting with entertainment. Rather, each textual environment reacts on the other in the interpretive practices of individual minds as well as the larger social environments of public discussion and commentary. To the extent that mass media feed the public imagination and organize the public sphere, they do so largely through the interaction of their factual and fictional forms.

In fact, the great dramatic works of literature, film, theater, and even television are able to dramatize social issues much more powerfully than we can see in the more “serious” worlds of news and politics (Jacobs, 2012). They show us intimate psycho-social portraits of individuals in pain, all trying to salvage some degree of moral dignity in a cold and heartless world. These dramas do not simply entertain through easy formulas or ideological messages about happiness-through-consumption. Instead, they challenge their viewers to empathize with the damaged, the weak, and the compromised. At the same time, these dramas expand the collective understanding of what counted as a matter of common concern. Breaking down the barrier between public and private, these psychological portraits are deeply sociological in the way they suggest a link between biographical problems and socio-historical structures.

While it is clear that aesthetic publics have an impact on civic discourse, it is important not to overstate their significance and, by doing so, lapse into an uncritical celebration of them as promoting some kind of unbridled participatory culture. At the very least, we need to recognize the ways that entertainment media and aesthetic publics are shaped by existing symbolic hierarchies, which privilege serious talk about politics and policy and which call into question the importance of entertainment and other putative diversions. Because these hierarchies are deeply institutionalized, they establish readily available dismissals of entertainment. The result is a tendency toward a certain defensiveness on the part of those who participate in aesthetic publics, based on the always-present possibility that they will be called on to justify the seriousness of their pursuits and the importance of their discussions. Fans of video games and reality television use these entertainment programs as springboards for open-ended discussions about a variety of important public matters, but they are aware that in the world of “serious people” they are looked down upon for wasting their time (McKernan, 2015). With this in mind, a central empirical question concerns the specific combination of factors that allow these entertainment-based interests to engage the civic identities of their users.

Civic identities and other identities

Finally, it is important to recognize that citizenship is not the only identity that influences people when they participate in civil society and the public sphere. People who participate in video game discussion boards can have sophisticated discussions about race or other social matters, but the most important thing that motivates their discussions is whether the game they are playing is a good one or not (McKernan, 2015). Internet discussions about reality television in China often involved complex discussions about what legitimate criticism looks like, but they also include lots of debate about who is the best singer (Wu, 2011). Fans of classical music, popular music, and sports are similar in this respect too. The empirical challenge is to discover the conditions under which the fan identities encourage or block the cultivation of effective civic identities and citizenship practices.

When we move from audiences to producers, we also see competing identities at play. The people who do creative work in media organizations are influenced by social, cultural, political, and economic factors that do not only involve the normative ideals of civil society or deliberative democracy which are so central to the public sphere tradition. In fact, as Pierre Bourdieu's theory of fields suggests, the principles of rationality, citizenship, and deliberative democracy are always asserted within a relational and agonistic space composed of competing principles. On the one hand, internalist marks of distinction overlap with civic identities, and they are sanctified through prestigious journalism awards such as the Pulitzer Prize or the Peabody Award (Benson, Neveu, 2005: 4). On the other hand, externalist marks of distinction dismiss these markers of distinction, preferring to focus on circulation size and profit. Indeed, media mogul Rupert Murdoch has always been highly critical of the pursuit of Pulitzers, dismissing them as "journalists writing stories to impress other journalists" (Bowden, 2008: 111). Both principles are available to creative personnel as a way of thinking about their work.

Conclusion

The point is that we need to move beyond Jürgen Habermas and beyond political theory. We need a cultural sociology of media and civil society. This cultural sociology is, at its core, an empirical research enterprise, devoted to comparing the narratives and the performances that are put forth in different concrete publics. It is devoted to comparing how different media organizations and different media formats gravitate toward specific kinds of narratives and cultural performances. And it is committed to exploring how these narratives intersect with the many different identities that inform our civic practices.

References

- Alexander J. C., 1998, "Civil Society I, II, III: Constructing an Empirical Concept from Normative Controversies and Historical Transformations", pp. 1-19, in: Alexander J. C., ed., *Real Civil Societies. Dilemmas of Institutionalization*, London, Sage.
- Alexander J. C., 2006, *The Civil Sphere*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Alexander J. C., Smith P., 1993, "The Discourse of American Civil Society: A New Proposal for Cultural Studies," *Theory and Society*, 22(2), pp. 151-207.
- Baiocchi G., 2006, "The Civilizing Force of Social Movements: Corporate and Liberal Codes in Brazil's Public Sphere," *Sociological Theory*, 24(4), pp. 285-311.
- Benhabib S., 2002, *The Claims of Culture*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press.
- Benson R., Neveu É., eds, 2005, *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, Cambridge, Polity.
- Bowden M., 2008, "Mr. Murdoch Goes to War," *The Atlantic*, 301(1), pp. 106-114.
- Eley G., 1992, "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century," pp. 289-339, in: Calhoun C., ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press.
- Fraser N., 1992, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," pp. 109-142, in: Calhoun C., ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press.
- Habermas J., 1962, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. by T. Burger, Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1989.
- Habermas J., 1992, "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere," pp. 421-461, in: Calhoun C., ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press.
- Habermas J., 1996, *Between Facts and Norms. Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press.
- Jacobs R. N., 1996a, "Civil Society and Crisis: Culture, Discourse, and the Rodney King Beating," *American Journal of Sociology*, 101(5), pp. 1238-1272.
- Jacobs R. N., 1996b, "Producing the News, Producing the Crisis: Narrativity, Television, and News Work," *Media, Culture, and Society*, 18(3), pp. 373-397.
- Jacobs R. N., 2000, *Race, Media, and the Crisis of Civil Society. From Watts to Rodney King*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Jacobs R. N., 2012, "Entertainment Media and the Aesthetic Public Sphere," pp. 318-342, in: Alexander J., Jacobs R. N., Smith P., eds, *Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Jacobs R. N., Sobieraj S., 2007, "Narrative and Legitimacy: US Congressional Debates about the Nonprofit Sector," *Sociological Theory*, 25(1), pp. 1-25.
- Jacobs R. N., Townsley E., 2011, *The Space of Opinion. Media Intellectuals and the Public Sphere*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Jamieson K., Cappella J., 2008, *Echo Chamber. Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

- Ku A., 1999, *Narratives, Politics, and the Public Sphere. Struggles over Political Reform in the Final Transitional Years in Hong Kong*, Aldershot UK, Ashgate.
- Lichterman P., 2005, *Elusive Togetherness. Church Groups Trying to Bridge America's Divisions*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press.
- McKernan B., 2015, "The Meaning of a Game: Stereotypes, Video Game Commentary, and Color-Blind Racism," *American Journal of Cultural Sociology*, 3, pp. 224-253.
- Park R., 1938, "Reflections on Communication and Culture," *American Journal of Sociology*, 44, pp. 187-205.
- Park R., 1940, "News as a Form of Knowledge: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge," *American Journal of Sociology*, 45, pp. 669-686.
- Park R., 1941, "Morale and the News," *American Journal of Sociology*, 47, pp. 360-377.
- Putnam R., 2000, *Bowling Alone*, New York, Simon & Schuster.
- Ryan M., 1992, "Gender and Public Access: Women's Politics in Nineteenth-Century America," pp. 259-288, in: Calhoun C., ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge MA, MIT Press.
- Smith P., 2005, *Why War? The Cultural Logic of Iraq, the Gulf War, and Suez*, Chicago, Chicago University Press.
- Wu J., 2011, "Enlightenment or Entertainment: The Nurturance of an Aesthetic Public Sphere through a Popular Talent Show in China," *The Communication Review*, 14, pp. 46-67.
- Young I. M., 2000, *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.