Questioning the Ideal of the Public Sphere: The Emotional Turn

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Abstract

This article discusses the usefulness and limitations of Habermas concept of the public sphere, on the basis of the trajectory of the author's work. It starts from the observation that the concept has generated a rich scholarly debate on tensions between the normative ideals and the nitty-gritty lived experience of mediated publics. While fundamental norms of interaction associated with the ideal of the public sphere remain essential to the creation of meaningful debate, it also relies on a series of unhelpful binary distinctions that may be neither normatively desirable nor attainable. Key assumptions of the public sphere model include the idea that public debate should be rational, impartial, dispassionate, and objective. This, in turn, implies the undesirability of emotionality, partiality, passion, and subjectivity. In recent years, particularly in response to the rise of digital and social media, scholars have begun to question the rigid delineation of such norms. The article draws on the author's work to illuminate how an "emotional turn" in media studies has opened up for a more nuanced appraisal of the role of subjectivity and personal stories in the articulation of the common good, challenging Habermasian understandings of rational-critical debate. This "emotional turn" constitutes an essential resource for theorizing public debate as it unfolds within a hybrid media system, for better and for worse. The article shows how the "emotional turn" has shaped the author's work on mediated public debate, ranging from letters to the editor and user-generated content to Twitter hashtags and the "emotional architecture" of Facebook.

Keywords

emotion, journalism studies, Habermas, public sphere, objectivity

I came of age as a believer in the ideal of the public sphere. My PhD examined editorial practices surrounding the selection and editing of letters to the editor, drawing on ethnographic field work and interviews with news workers in the San Francisco Bay Area (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2000). I looked at letters to the editor as a forum for public debate and was interested in the conditions for participation generated by the letters section. My work was underpinned by Habermas concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989). In the Habermasian public sphere, discussion must be rational, open to all those with an interest in the issue, and participants in the discussion should be judged purely on the merits of their arguments.

My PhD research, however, unveiled a key tension between the lofty normative ideals espoused by Habermas and his followers, and the nitty-gritty of lived experience. In interviews, news workers dealing with letters tended to proclaim the importance of rational and informed public debate. But when asked for concrete examples of their favorite letters, they waxed lyrical about contributions which spoke to lived and embodied experience. Their examples ranged far and wide. One editor, for example, praised a letter written by a lifelong resident of the Los Altos Hills, bemoaning the rapid transformation of the landscape around him, in the face of rampant development of mansions for Silicon Valley millionaires. The resident wrote: "I was told that my house—redwood siding, 10-foot beamed ceilings—would be torn down when I die. This is because my lot is so great for another castle. There is no more rural anymore."

For the news workers I interviewed and observed, such personal letters were particularly powerful because they used concrete, embodied, and emotionally resonant stories to render tangible the consequences of abstract events and developments. As one editor reflected, in talking about her favorite debate, which involved community members writing in about the closure of a local bookstore: "So this was more personal, because it was really affecting them. It was very moving to see people being so upset about this."

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My work on letters to the editor, therefore, alerted me to a fundamental problem of the concept of the public sphere: while the norms of interaction associated with the ideal of the public sphere remain essential to the creation of meaningful debate, the concept also has embedded within it a series of unhelpful binary distinctions that may be neither normatively desirable nor attainable in actually existing interactions. Such assumptions include the idea that public debate should be rational, impartial, disembodied, dispassionate, and objective. This, in turn, implies that emotionality, embodiment, partiality, passion, and subjectivity have no place in the public sphere.

The insight that public debate usually is, and probably should be, more than rational-critical debate has stayed with me over the years, as my work has turned to examining forms of public participation developing in the digital era and gathering further force with the invention of social media. Across work on journalistic practices around genres and forums as varied as vox pop interviews (Lewis, Inthorn, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005), user-generated content (Wahl-Jorgensen, Williams, & Wardle, 2010), disaster reporting (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cottle, 2012) and hashtag activism (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019), I have found that personal and emotional stories appear to be widely valued by both journalists and audience members. They are valued because they have the capacity to cultivate compassion and enlarge our world views.

Together, these empirical insights have complicated my theoretical affinities. I have retained a conviction that Habermas was right about the importance of civil, respectful and factually grounded public debate. At the same time, I have found much to agree with in the work of radical democrats (e.g., Mouffe, 2005) who insist on the messiness and agonism inherent in lived experiences of political life. Likewise, feminist approaches have alerted us to the power relations underpinning the conditions for public discourse, obscured by the premises of normative ideals rooted in the celebration of rationality and its opposition to emotion. First, feminist critiques of Habermas have shown that subjectivity is inevitable and, in many cases, normatively desirable, and, second, definitions of what constitutes the "rational" in the first place are profoundly shaped by prevailing power relations (e.g., Meehan, 1995/2013).

At the same time, such questioning of received normative frameworks has gained renewed impetus over the past decade in the light of an "affective turn" across humanities and social sciences fields (e.g., Clough & Halley, 2007). In media, communication and journalism studies, the allegiance to Habermasian ideals of rational public debate has combined with the force of the liberal democratic model of media, which has tended to understand news media as a watchdog on concentrations of power, holding governments and corporations accountable through objective reporting. The journalistic ideal of objectivity has rendered any role played by emotionality in journalism largely invisible.

Along with other scholars (e.g., Pantti, 2010; Peters, 2011), I arrived at the view that in my own field of journalism studies, emotion has tended to be an "elephant in the room" or an epistemological blind spot. That is to say, I came to believe that despite the allegiance to objectivity, much of the best of journalism draws extensively on emotion. In my work studying Pulitzer Prize winning journalism from 1995 to the present, I found that award winners across news genres did, in fact, use emotion extensively (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). Stories dramatized and made tangible abstract and complex news events—ranging from breakthroughs in medical treatments and the globalization of the fishing industry to the global refugee crisis—by drawing on the personal stories of individuals caught up in these events. In doing so, Pulitzer Prize winners "outsourced" the expression of emotion. Journalists never spoke of their own emotions, but instead narrated those of their sources and subjects.

This work led to a broader interest in rendering visible and taking seriously the role of emotion in mediated public life—for better and for worse. Doing so opens up for a broad array of new avenues for research, which allow for a nuanced appraisal of how emotions circulate through our increasingly complex media ecologies. In many of the cases that I have examined in my work, emotions are used for normatively "good" purposes: among others, to cultivate compassion and render visible the lived consequences of events both large and small. At the same time, they can also be a tool for fueling hatred and exclusion. Such concerns have long been embedded in anxieties over the role of emotions in political life but have gained urgency and salience with the recent rise of alt-right and extremist movements around the world. As events ranging from the rise in hate crime after Brexit and the US presidential elections in 2016 to the recent mosque shootings in Christchurch, New Zealand have demonstrated, the circulation of hateful language has consequences for action.

Emotions ranging from love and hope to anger, hatred, and disgust circulate through our bodies and make their way into our mediated discussions, where they have the potential to form the basis for the articulation of collective grievances, toward the aim of political and social change (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018b). Rendering visible the movement of emotions—and they ways in which they are inextricably linked to rational political decision-making (e.g., Westen, 2007) is a vital and constantly evolving task. As Stephen Coleman (2013) put it, "what democracy *does* and how democracy *feels* are not separable considerations" (p. 191).

This work has been part of what we might describe as a broader "emotional turn" in media studies. It has meant that growing numbers of scholars are now studying varied facets of the role of emotion in the production, texts, and audience engagement with media. If anything, the attention to emotion has dramatically increased in the light of the rise of social media. This development is shaped, at least in part, by the affordances of social media. The "emotional architectures" of social media (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2018a) frequently

both facilitate and privilege emotional engagement, often in the direction of pro-social positivity, as a means of monetizing audience behavior. At the same time, the architecture of social media platforms enables the emergence of "affective news streams" which are simultaneously playful and humorous, cacophonous, collaborative and antagonistic (Papacharissi, 2015).

The growing importance of emotional expression in social media is not only confined to citizens and activists but also shapes the styles of journalists sharing news through sites like Twitter and Facebook. Along those lines, Beckett and Deuze (2016, p. 6) have detected a trend "toward a more mobile, personalized, and emotionally driven news media." At the same time, in an era of "hybrid media" (Chadwick, 2017), where "old" and "new" platforms and media organizations mingle, the more emotional logics of social media spill over into the content of mainstream media.

The emotional turn in media studies, as it has taken shape over the past decade and become increasingly salient alongside the growth of social media, has helped to refine not just the questions we ask about mediated public life, but also the normative ideals underpinning it. For myself and many others working in the area, Habermas' theory of the public sphere has served as a vital sensitizing concept. It set up a rigorous yardstick against which to measure conditions for participation and debate. But, perhaps more importantly, by naming the public sphere—as both an ideal and an empirical phenomenon—in the first place, his work has opened up for critical conversations that have enabled us to refine our inquiry. I may no longer believe in Habermas, ideal of rational-critical debate, but I do believe that the creation and sustenance of a democratic public sphere—whatever that may look like—remains essential to public life. However, as the emotional turn has demonstrated, a commitment to a vision of democratic life must entail the recognition of the central and inevitable place of emotion. It is a force that may unite or divide, and assist or cloud our deliberations, but is ultimately inseparable from rational decision-making.

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