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SCHOLARSHIP

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CONSTRUCTING THE PUBLIC: LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AS A FORUM FOR DELIBERATION

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This dissertation uncovers the norms and practices of some of those who guard the public sphere: The editors, letters editors, editorial writers and editorial page in charge of constructing the letters to the editor section as a forum for public debate. The project takes an interest in the letters section because it is one of the few arenas for public discussion by regular citizens, and is, as such, a key institution of the public sphere.

It is a premise of this study that letters editors play a central role in making decisions about the varieties of public discourse in letters sections, and that studying their work can help us think about how we conduct our democratic conversation. This project, then, ventures down a new avenue for investigating the relationship between the public, the press, and democracy: It examines how editors understand the public, how they view the newspaper's role in democracy, what assumptions they make about the public and public debate, what languages they use to describe these concepts, and how these languages shape the letters section.

More than that, however, the project raises the question of how the media *should* engage in the endeavour of democracy. To provide a theoretical and historical background for this discussion, I outline an analytical, normative and historical framework grounded in theories of deliberative democracy, or the belief that "democratic politics involves public deliberation focused on the common good, requires some form of manifest equality among citizens, and shapes the identity and interests of citizens in ways that contribute to the formation of a public conception of common good" (Cohen 1997, 69). On the basis of a broad range of contemporary and historical approaches to political philosophy, the project also develops a typology for understanding forms of action in public, or 'publicity': It suggests that while the rational, consensus-orientated form of discussion favoured by deliberative democrats – here referred to as dialogist publicity — might be the most desirable form of public action, we must also recognise and take seriously other forms of public action; in particular *activist publicity*, or public action oriented towards the achievement of particular political goals, and *exhibitionist publicity*, which sees the public as the site for the construction, perpetuation and display of individual subjectivity.

This theoretical context for public expression is applied in three studies of the norms and practices that guide the construction of the public in letters: (1) a critical discourse analysis of more than 60 articles about letters written by editors in *The Masthead*, the US National Conference of Editorial Writers' quarterly publication,

(2) 23 in-depth interviews with letters editors and editors of San Francisco Bay Area newspapers, conducted between June 15 and August 1, 1999, and lasting between one-and-a-half and four hours, and (3) a case study of one Bay Area newsroom; that of the *Bay Herald* newspaper, conducted in August and September of 1999. These studies point to a gap between the norms and practices of letters editors: They have great hopes for the democratic potential of the letters section, but despair at the actual quality of public discourse that they observe in their daily work.

Normatively, editors are committed to a vision of the letters section as a “wide open” public forum, a site for all individuals to speak their minds. While the editors embrace the democratic potential of letters, the section has also been seen, in more pragmatic terms, as a “customer service” feature for irate readers to get complaints off their chests. The simultaneous emphasis on the importance of individual expression *and* quality customer service gives rise to a “normative-economic justification” for public discourse, which captures the idea that a strong letters section is good for both democracy and business.

When editors speak about the kinds of letters they value, they suggest that they prefer the emotionally charged story telling of individuals, which they value over the manufactured discourse of activists. To them, only personal and passionate stories invite the forging of emotional bonds between readers and writers. The dissertation suggests that while the emphasis on individual display does not square with deliberative democratic ideals, we must also be aware that emotional involvement can foster social solidarity.

Even though the editors are articulate about their hopes for public discourse, their concerns about democracy are subsumed to the quest for efficiency in newspaper production. In the newsroom of the *Bay Herald*, where the ethnographic case study was conducted, the letters section comes to be viewed primarily as a task of manual labour: Though the staff believe in the importance of public debate, the actual work involved in providing the conditions for it is dull and routine. Members of the editorial page staff, who take pride in their status as intellectual labourers, struggle to minimise the time they spend on non-creative tasks such as editing letters. More than that, the editorial page staff at the *Bay Herald*, as a result of the discrepancy between their expressed hopes for the letters section and the perceived poor quality of writing, approach the letters with a cynical attitude. In fact, they operate on the “assumption of insanity” — the idea that most contributors to the section are, by default, insane, or “crazy.”

On the basis of these findings, the project ultimately suggests that in contemporary society, commercial media cannot be the soul of democracy. Even if the newsmen genuinely believe in the power of citizen participation in public debate, they are burdened with the responsibility of making democracy work. And as they go about providing the conditions for public discourse, they don’t like what they see. As a result of their frustration with the distance between their normative visions and lived experience, the letters editors feel both disdain and disgust for the letter-writing public, and ridicule it to reject any responsibility for changing the status quo.

Solving these problems requires not merely shifting newsroom practices towards greater respect for public participation, but more structural changes in soci-

ety, to address the inequalities that endanger public discourse. Failing that, the public debate of the letters section and the democratic process in general will remain skewed towards the concerns of those in power. Whether they never raise their voice in the first place, or whether their attempt ends in the editor's trash can, the silent, the inarticulate, and the long-winded will be left out of the public deliberation.

Reference:

Cohen, Jean. 1997. Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy. In J. Bohmann and W. Rehg (eds.), *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, 67-93. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

CORRIGENDUM

Author of the article "Habermas and the Public Sphere: From a German to a European Perspective" published in the last issue of *Javnost/The Public* (No. 1, 2001) is Professor Hans J. **Kleinsteuber**. We apologise to the author and the readers for having misspelled his name.