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Habermas and Oppositional Public Spheres: A Stereoscopic Analysis of Black and White Press Practices

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Drawing upon Jürgen Habermas's discourse-based theoretical approach, this article argues that his thesis regarding the bourgeois public sphere needs to be redirected so as (1) to show how sources of communicative action may have dried up within the bourgeois public sphere and (2) to explore real emancipatory alternatives that spring up as oppositional voices of subaltern groups, oriented to understanding, and expressed in contexts wherein people's upward struggles against power and domination have not yet been completed. In support of the argument, a stereoscopic analysis is conducted that focuses on public sphere practices and counter-practices – specifically those of *The New York Times* as exemplar participant of bourgeois publicness and the black-owned and operated *New York Amsterdam News* as its oppositional counterpart.

In his reflections on *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989 [1962]) Jürgen Habermas considers the question:

> of whether, and to what extent, a public sphere dominated by mass media provides a realistic chance for the members of civil society, in their competition with the political and economic invaders' media power, to bring about changes in the spectrum of values, topics and reasons channeled by external influences, to open it up in an innovative way, and to screen it critically (Habermas, 1992, p. 455).

He then answers: 'It seems to me that the concept of a public sphere operative in the political realm, as I developed it in *Structural Transformation*, still provides the appropriate analytical perspective for the treatment of this problem' (Habermas, 1992, p. 455). He also acknowledges, however, that the analytical perspective is not sufficient by itself but requires 'considerable empirical research' (Habermas, 1992, p. 455), thereby posing a challenge to those who may be tempted to study the public sphere while drawing upon his discourse-centered theoretical approach.

At stake here is the emancipatory potential of the public sphere and its capacity to deepen and extend the possibilities of democratic life. Yet despite the theoretical richness of Habermas's work and its empirical-analytical promise, researchers have by no means been quick to take up the challenge (but compare Forester, 1985; Gunson and Collins, 1997). Instead, much contemporary research on the

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public sphere has only directed obligatory nods toward the grand sweep of Habermas's thesis before shunting aside its idealized scaffolding in favor of more concretely rigorous empirical approaches (e.g. Alexander, 1995; Barkley Brown, 1995; Gregory, 1995). An often cited reason for this tendency points to Habermas's concept of the bourgeois public sphere, which is said to underestimate its own record of exclusionary practices as well as the counter-practices of excluded groups that have formed 'shadow publics' in response (e.g. Calhoun, 1992; Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1990; Negt and Kluge, 1993 [1972]). In acknowledging such concerns Habermas has stated the need for a 'stereoscopic view' that might reveal how a 'mechanism of exclusion that locks out and represses at the same time calls forth countereffects that cannot be neutralized' (Habermas, 1992, p. 427). Yet the statement has received no serious follow-up, as Habermas has provided few specifics for fusing together the analytical with the empirical in terms of articulated method, scope and design (Blaug, 1997; Ruane and Todd, 1988). This omission becomes all the more significant when considered in light of the normative dimension of his work. For short of a successful integration of descriptive and analytical statements it is not clear that we can know how or where to hold up emancipatory ideals as a means of critically assessing contemporary public sphere practices.

This article addresses these considerations through a series of three claims. First, I argue that although critics of Habermas's thesis are right to point to its underestimation of both the public sphere's record of exclusionary practices and forms of otherness spawned as a result, his responses have been sufficiently corrective, albeit sketchy and in need of additional filling in. Second, I maintain that a satisfactory response that begins with explicit reference to Habermas's discourse-centered theoretical approach needs also to take into account exclusionary practices and forms of oppositional otherness – a need that has heretofore not been sufficiently met. So doing should not in any way diminish the broad arch of Habermas's theoretical edifice but in fact may point to new and theoretically powerful applications to empirical domains. Indeed, my third claim is that it is only by wedding together Habermas's discourse-centered theoretical approach with empirically grounded practices of power and opposition that the full normative potential of his theory can be realized.

In demonstrating the analytical utility of all three claims I offer a preliminary sketch of a stereoscopic analysis which focuses on public sphere practices and counter-practices – specifically those of *The New York Times* as exemplar participant of bourgeois publicness and the black-owned and operated *New York Amsterdam News* as its oppositional counterpart – and which applies Habermas's discourse-centered theoretical approach to exclusionary discursive practices on the one hand, and oppositional responses on the other, with special consideration given to their bearing on questions regarding the normative basis for ideology critique as it pertains to a public sphere dominated by mass media.

Habermas's Theory of the Bourgeois Public Sphere and Challenges from Otherness

Habermas has proclaimed the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere as a radically new development in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when private citizens begin to assemble in free and open spaces, relatively unfettered by inequalities of status or role. He describes the phenomenon as 'an intermediary structure between the political system on the one hand, and the private sectors of the lifeworld and functional systems, on the other' (Habermas, 1996, p. 393), which provides a forum where citizens openly and freely interact with the intent to motivate others to act in concert toward collectively held goals. This is made possible by a bracketing out of social inequalities whereby all participants are recognized as communicative equals who share a normative background of mutually recognized validity conditions regarding what counts as uttering true, sincere and just speech acts, and who are committed to purely symmetrical forms of discourse that allow those shared validity conditions to be freely and openly brought into play. This entails an embrace of normatively based procedures such as mutual recognition, hermeneutic sensitivity and reciprocal perspective taking, all meant to ensure that validity claims can be produced, questioned and contested without reservation. In so far as such procedures themselves carry a prescriptive force, they may be said to exemplify an emancipatory potential.

Critics of Habermas's thesis have expressed dissatisfaction with its apparent underestimation of the bourgeois public sphere's historical record of exclusionary practices. Nancy Fraser (1990, p. 61), for example, has argued that the bourgeois public sphere should be recognized not so much as a domain of freedom and openness but rather as 'the arena, the training ground, and eventually the power base of a stratum of bourgeois men, who were coming to see themselves as a "universal class" ... and who excoriated alternative public spheres in an effort to block broader participation'. A parallel line of critique by Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993 [1972]) has underscored the class-based character of the bourgeois public sphere which delegitimated those who lacked private property or cultural capital. And yet others have linked the bourgeois public sphere in the United States to an ideology of racial supremacy that portrayed the black world 'as an irrational, illiterate, owned, nonbourgeois community of chattel', its potentials denied, and public membership being out of the question (Baker, 1999, p. 271). These critics also note Habermas's relative neglect of excluded groups, voiceless in the bourgeois public sphere but not silent in their alternatively constituted lifeworld practices, which at different points have crystallized into contestatory public spheres from which social movements have been launched (Calhoun, 1992). Indeed, it is likely that the bourgeois order blocked broader participation of these groups because they *were* often combative (as well as highly literate) and posed a significant challenge to the dominant public sphere. As Geoff

Eley notes, by neglecting the excluded oppositional other, Habermas 'misses the extent to which the public sphere was always constituted by conflict', and not solely conflict with absolutism, for 'it necessarily addressed the problem of popular containment as well' (Eley, 1992, p. 306).

Habermas has granted the validity of these concerns but without relinquishing his core theoretical proposition: exclusionary practices and the pressures behind them may indeed work at cross-purposes with the ideals of open and free communication, and in so doing they represent a degradation of the public sphere; yet admitting this does not undercut the idea that open and free communication were instantiated within the public sphere *qua* prescriptive ideals that by their very presence posed a critical challenge to emergent or residual rationales for exclusionary practices. Habermas's defense is not that the communicative ideals of the bourgeois public sphere have effectively overcome any and all practical obstacles, but that the articulated emergence of such ideals, however contradicted by non-democratic ideologies and the exclusionary practices they support, nevertheless have radically transformed the landscape of public discourse. Power-based intrusions within the public sphere, on this view, are admittedly troublesome, but Habermas argues that these kinds of exclusionary practices, irrespective of who wields them or their targets, have been difficult to uphold because of public sphere expectations that they discursively validate themselves out in the open where any and all validity claims may be critically assessed and publicly contested (Habermas, 1996, pp. 373–6; Keane, 1988). Habermas states (1998, p. 169):

> independently of their cultural backgrounds all the participants intuitively know quite well that a consensus based on conviction cannot come about as long as symmetry relations do not exist among the participants – relations of mutual recognition, reciprocal perspective-taking, a shared willingness to consider one's own tradition with the eyes of the stranger and *to learn* from one another, and so forth (emphasis in original).

Habermas also concedes that he may have underemphasized the import of counter-publics that developed in response to the bourgeois public sphere's exclusionary practices (Habermas, 1992, p. 427). But again he argues that greater consideration of alternative public spheres should not necessarily weaken his thesis, for alternative publics may be presumed to share with the dominant the same normatively backed conditions for producing, questioning and contesting validity claims, as well as the procedures that ensure that such conditions are realized. Here he distinguishes between two forms of excluded otherness, one having been vividly detailed in Foucault's works where 'there is no communication between those within and those without', and where 'Those who participate in the [dominant] discourse do not share a common language with the protesting others' (Habermas, 1992, p. 429). A second emerges with bourgeois publicness and is contrasted with the first by a presence of shared communicative norms and procedures. As free and open conditions of discourse characterize the

bourgeois public sphere, so they are available *in derivative form* within alternative public spheres, since a *permeability of boundaries* between the bourgeois public sphere and its alternatives is assumed:

> Bourgeois publicness ... is articulated in discourses that provided areas of *common ground* not only for the labor movement but also for ...the feminist movement. Contact with these movements in turn transformed those discourses and the structures of the public sphere itself from within (Habermas, 1992, p. 429, emphasis added).

It bears noting that Habermas's responses call out for empirical support. Yet Habermas has offered little in the way of analysis of the discrepant aspects of emancipatory communication and exclusionary practices on the one hand, or emergent counter-publics as responses to bourgeois publicness on the other. This poses difficulties for those seeking to examine the role of power in its relation to publicness – its manifestations in exclusionary practices as well as its propensity to disguise its practices from those it targets or to hide its motivations from even its own practitioners – as little analytical guidance is offered with respect to how, i.e. under what conditions, power-based practices and their justifying ideologies might be made transparent to public sphere participants (Bohman, 1986, p. 141; Horowitz, 1998, p. 19).

Consider, for example, the antebellum period in the United States when the South's public sphere consisted largely of slaveholders who denied the discrepancies 'between [enlightenment] ideals and certain lethal patterns of behavior ... developed through acts of unconscious and self-deceiving compromise' (Davis, 1976, p. 52). Denial and self-deception were perpetuated in public sphere venues such as Southern farm journals in which pieces 'were written by Southerners for Southerners, all of whom shared a common concern' and who shared the belief 'that the black was hopelessly inferior to the white and, while deserving humane treatment, was created for the benefit of the superior race' (Breeden, 1980, p. xi). Those who disagreed faced formidable obstacles including the hegemony of law whereby it appeared to be 'mere egotism and antisocial behavior to attempt to go outside the law unless one [was] prepared to attack the entire legal system and therefore the consensual framework of the body politic' (Genovese, 1974, pp. 27–8). Although it is conceivable that this monolith of thought might have been effectively broken down at some point without external intervention, it is not at all clear, given the extent of the dominant ideology – backed by a planter class that 'wielded power through its monopoly on knowledge as well as property [and that] controlled the appointment and livelihood of teachers, postmasters, and village newspaper editors' (Davis, 1969, p. 56) – whether that point might have arrived sooner rather than later.

Habermas's claims of a common ground – the existence of derivative communicative forms and permeable boundaries between dominant and alternative public spheres – also seem to invite a suspension of belief both as to how power operates in relation to the excluded other and how it is resisted (Baumeister,

2003; Deveaux, 2000). These claims not only seem to ignore the modes of communicative distortion that are deployed by the dominant in order to restrict the flow of communication between itself and the excluded other, but also fail to appreciate the full significance of how the other organizes itself in opposition, to the extent perhaps of enacting a comparatively more open and free set of discursive practices than its dominant counterpart, and this in the face of a dominant public sphere that may be in denial of the restrictive nature of its own discursive practices.[1] Here there appears a certain irony involved in the call for analysts to view the relation of the dominant and excluded other from the standpoint of what both commonly share, not from what might have rendered them distinct and oppositional or what contributes to their ongoing division. Foucault's analyses of the dominant and other, as Habermas notes, may indicate an absence of shared discursive resources, but they nevertheless trace out pivotal interplays of power and resistance that produce change. Habermas's thesis, in contrast, stresses a shared commonality of discursive norms and processes available to both the dominant and other, but does not provide a detailed account of how such common ground might have produced transformations either between or within dominant and oppositional public spheres.

To summarize briefly, there is validity to concerns raised that Habermas's thesis has not been attentive enough to the dialectical tensions between the dominant and its resistant other. Habermas has acknowledged the validity of such claims, though without fully incorporating their content into his overall analytical perspective. This bears negatively on the overall effectiveness of his project, however, for analyses of forms of otherness, the contents of their dissatisfaction as well as the kinds of normative alternative they offer – interesting in their own right – not only might shed critical light on the possible shortcomings of the dominant they oppose, but also contribute to a better theoretical understanding of the possible routes emergent normative ideals may take when confronted by real power (e.g. James, 2004, p. 59). This is to suggest that Habermas's overall analytical perspective needs to be more fully developed in light of what he acknowledges to be valid criticisms. I elaborate this point more fully in the following section.

Theoretical Foundations of the Bourgeois Public Sphere: Communicative and Strategic Action

For Habermas, a quintessential feature of the bourgeois public sphere is 'all those conditions of communication under which there can come into being a discursive formation of opinion and will on the part of a public composed of citizens of a state' (Habermas, 1996, p. 446). Through public discourse autonomous citizens openly engage one another and do so with the expectation that fellow citizens' opinions or willful decisions are true, sincerely expressed and grounded in acceptable notions of rightness; and where such expectations appear to be violated or otherwise unfulfilled, so the public sphere provides an atmosphere wherein the sincerity, truth or rightness of participants' discursive offerings can be

openly questioned or challenged by communicative means. It is in fact the openness of the communicative process wherein validity claims are raised and contested that distinguishes this form of communication – what Habermas terms communicative action – from others: 'I have called the type of interaction in which all participants harmonize their individual plans of action with one another and thus pursue their illocutionary aims *without reservation* "communicative action" ' (Habermas, 1984, p. 294).

Communicative action consists of three distinct features. First, pure symmetry is presupposed among interactants, irrespective of contradictory social forces outside the communicative process such as social inequalities, institutional goals, self- or group-interests. Second, while interactants may harbor a strategic desire to motivate one another, this is achieved by rational means (as distinct from causal means such as coercion or deception), which consists of presenting one's case truthfully, sincerely and appropriately, as well as being open to questions, challenges or counterclaims. And, third, efforts to motivate one another must be done with transparency as to one's own motivations, i.e. without secrecy, deceit or deception. Each of these three carries a prescriptive force grounded in communicative interactants' shared commitment to the background norms for uttering validity claims as well as to the procedural norms for ensuring that claims of truth, truthfulness and rightness are discursively put to the test within the open community.

Communicative action is contrasted with strategic action, which is of three types: openly strategic action; manipulation; and systematically distorted communication. In openly strategic action, one or more interactants attempt to bring about desired ends such as success in war or attainment of economic or political goals, but as Habermas notes, 'background consensus is lacking; the truthfulness of expressed intention is not expected; and the norm conformity of an utterance (or the rightness of the norm itself) is presupposed in a different sense than in communicative action – namely, contingently' (Habermas, 1979, p. 118). Openly strategic action, unlike communicative action, proceeds without pretense of symmetry between interlocutors but rather appears to be most frequently used in its absence – e.g. when conditions between dominant and subordinate are such that the former sees pure symmetry as a threat to the status quo and the latter feels no other communicative option is feasible.[2] Manipulation, in contrast, involves one of the interlocutors appealing to the norms that inhere in communicative action in a deliberately deceptive manner so as to influence an otherwise unsuspecting other – e.g. utterances of a statement the speaker knows to be untrue but used strategically to promote a personal or institutional interest with the hope that the hearer will fail to recognize the ruse (Habermas, 1984, pp. 272–337).

In systematically distorted communication like-minded interactants also opt for strategic means *but without conscious awareness of so doing*.[3] That is, one or both interactants may believe they are engaging in a way that accords with commu-

nicative action's normative background conditions of truth, truthfulness and rightness as well as the processes of rationality, openness and transparency of motive that are meant to ensure they are put into play; but in fact they are self-deceived in that those conditions and processes have in some respect been rendered subordinate to the aims of strategic action. Maeve Cooke (1994, p. 148) clarifies what has been offered by Habermas in sometimes sketchy form by noting that systematically distorted communication exerts itself in:

> the regulation of the normative context in which discussion takes place; it regulates who is allowed to participate in which discussion, who can initiate topics, who can bring the discussion to a close, who can contribute and in which order, how the topics are ordered and how the scope of the discussion is determined, etc.

Systematically distorted communication thereby disrupts all that is assumed within communicative action – viz. connections of meaning and validity, meaning and intention, speaking and acting (Bohman, 1986, p. 336) – and does so not occasionally but systematically. Some examples are as follows:

- Institutional norms prohibit certain styles of self-expression, perhaps on putative grounds that some styles reflect lack of civility, though without interactants' conscious reflection upon or discussion of the restrictive nature of such norms.
- Institutional norms emphasize that truth claims must have objective standing and be delivered impartially, thereby either militating against the raising of subjective truth claims or prohibiting overtly biased representation of such, and done without interactants' conscious recognition of the restrictive nature of the practice.
- Institutional expectations are that actors regard extant law as non-fallible and so regard stated positions predicated on grounds outside of law to be illegitimate, thus sealing off inquiry into extralegal challenges to the dominant order of things, and enforced without interactants' awareness of the possible fallibility of law, need for challenges to it or the extent to which the practice is itself restrictive.

In the above examples, agents may engage in an unreflective censorship of self or the other – both occurring outside the bounds of dialogically produced understanding – that effectively discourages some expressive styles, truth claims or moral views. When exercised as a matter of routine – i.e. systematically – by many or all socialized actors, such censorship may not only effectively undercut the potential for some forms of reflection or discourse but may also form the rationale for the enforcement of prohibitive entry requirements in various spheres of discourse.

Although varied forms of strategic action are most pervasive in institutional life, they also intrude into public sphere life, deployed frequently to further money, state or other power-based interests. In these cases, communicative and strategic action may become entangled with one another despite their clear distinctiveness

at the conceptual level.[4] For example, interactants who engage in systematically distorted communication may proceed as if there is symmetry among all public sphere interactants when in fact there is no symmetry, with consensus thus turning out to be false consensus marked by interactants assuming themselves to be acting in accord with the norms of communicative action and without awareness of how the norms are in fact being violated. Or, perhaps some groups, in response to systematically distorted communication that deflects attention away from forced asymmetry and its harmful effects, may feel compelled to utilize openly strategic action.

The presence of strategic action within the bourgeois public sphere is problematic for Habermas's thesis in that it seems to undercut his claim that public sphere communication makes ideologically biased claims increasingly difficult to sustain. Both manipulation and systematically distorted communication, for example, disguise their strategic motivations. And while perhaps the former may ultimately be exposed as strategic on account of the clarity of its effects upon previously unsuspecting interactants, this is not necessarily the case with the latter.[5] For if systematically distorted communication is present, then suitable discursive conditions may not be in play to render violations of conditions or procedures of communicative action readily apparent to interactants, and thus their intuitive knowledge as communicative beings may simply not be sufficient critically to cut through the perlocutionary fog of profit, control, containment or other by-products of systematically distorted communication. That is, it may not be readily apparent either to participant actors or third-person observers whether public sphere practices are being constituted through the norms of communicative action or only on the illusion of such.

Enter here the significance of otherness. Habermas, it may be recalled, emphasizes the *shared qualities* of dominant public and the other and is confident that the other's enactments of derivative communicative forms of otherness, combined with porous boundaries between dominant and other, ensure that the prescriptive force of the norms of communicative action will prevail. But what if systematically distorted communication seals off public sphere boundaries while at the same time locking out those it deems to be illegitimate? From whence then the inclination on the part of interactants to identify the distortion and critically to overcome it when they themselves are self-deceived *and* dismissive of the excluded other? Should not analysts feel compelled to look beyond the restrictive bounds of bourgeois publicness for the challenges otherness offers?

Such questions are meant to suggest that it is not sufficient to grant that another may produce 'countereffects that cannot be neutralized' (Habermas, 1992, p. 427), and then to treat the other's discursive productions as mere derivations of bourgeois public sphere practices. Indeed, the suggestion here is that the other, *qua* excluded other, may contribute communicative forms – e.g. openly strategic action – that might both expose otherwise invisible workings of systematically distorted communication and invite new ways of disentangling the complex

weavings of strategic and communicative action. This is perhaps best appreciated when differences between symmetry and asymmetry conditions are taken into account (see Table 1). Where pure symmetry conditions hold, communicative action is available to all potential interactants and so enables insiders and outsiders alike to orient toward reaching understanding and consensus. Following Habermas, under such conditions communicative action is clearly preferred over openly strategic action which, in its success orientation and norm-bending modes of realization, clearly works at cross-purposes with all that communicative action offers. Where conditions of asymmetry prevail, however, communicative action is likely to be trumped by systematically distorted communication which works to suppress the contradiction at the base of any claim of coexistence between communicative action and enforced communication inequality; and where systematically distorted communication takes hold, so excluded groups must forego communicative action as an option on account of its unavailability in the face of maintained conditions of asymmetry. The resort to openly strategic action by the excluded other, in these instances, may be viewed not as the antithesis of communicative action but rather as a necessary means by which to expose the otherwise invisible workings of systematically distorted communication and so invite all potential interactants to consider prospects of moving from asymmetry to symmetry where communicative action might then become available to all.

Table 1: Openly Strategic and Communicative Action

Communicative form	*Pure symmetry*	*Asymmetry: Uphill/Downhill*
Openly strategic action	(–) Violates norms of communicative action	(+) Exposes systematically distorted communication as pretender to communicative action
Communicative action	(+) Conforms to all normative background conditions	(–) Systematically distorted communication disguises contradiction between asymmetry and presumed norms of communicative action

What is needed at this point is a stereoscopic analysis of the type called for by Habermas, but which focuses uncompromisingly on the significance of otherness in relation to bourgeois publicness. Such an analysis can be used not only as a means to discover how the blinkered practices of systematically distorted communication may be illuminated in possibly unexpected ways by the very practices of those who have been locked out and whose own discursive contributions have been otherwise stymied, but perhaps also to shine light on the subterranean passageways through which alternative discourse wends its way in the face of systematic containment.

A Stereoscopic Analysis of Bourgeois and Counter-bourgeois Practices: The Press

Focus on the mass media may potentially enhance our understanding of public sphere practices. The press, for example, has a significant role as public sphere participant. As an essential medium through which flows a great deal of information, analysis and opinion, it always carries the potential to facilitate citizen engagement with issues of fact, norm and value. Moreover, the press actively selects what is newsworthy and commands a privileged position as to how it interpretatively shapes it. A challenge for analysts, therefore, is to ascertain not only how the emancipatory impulses of communicative action are blunted by the demands of strategic action, but also how barriers to the fulfillment of communicative action may sometimes be effectively countered by strategic action as engaged in by the excluded other.

In this regard, to restrict analysis solely to bourgeois public sphere practices as exemplified by the mainstream press may not be adequate to the task, especially if public sphere interactants are immersed within systematically distorted communication. A case in point is *The New York Times*, an agenda-setting newspaper frequently regarded as a standard-bearer of journalistic excellence (Diamond, 1994; Jones, 1999; Salisbury, 1980). Committed to being the 'newspaper of record' (Talese, 1969), its editors, journalists and features writers are expected to conform to a clear set of institutional guidelines that for many decades have been set forth in *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* (1999). Consider three of the highest standards promoted in this 'Holy Writ' (Shepard, 1996, p. 306) for the newspaper's employees: first, in keeping with 'the Times's impression of its educated and sophisticated readership – traditional but not tradition-bound', the *Manual* recommends 'a fluid style, easygoing but not slangy and only occasionally colloquial' (p. viii). Slang, for example, is associated with flippancy and the *Manual* cautions against its use, for 'it can create the embarrassing spectacle of a grown-up who tries to pass for an adolescent' (p. 307). Second, in keeping with the avowed aim to print 'all the news that is fit to print' the *Manual* upholds the *Times*' credo: 'To give the news impartially, without fear or favor, regardless of any party, sect or interest involved' (Talese, 1969, p. 29). This entails favoring 'constructions that keep language neutral, a crystalline medium through which journalists report ideas without proclaiming stances' (*Manual*, p. viii). And third, the *Manual* claims to 'differentiate itself by taking a stand for civility in public discourse' and does so by counseling respect for group sensibilities (p. 240). The *Manual* cautions against offensive or coy hints (p. 24), for example, as well as slurs: 'The epithets of bigotry ordinarily have no place in the newspaper. Even in ironic or self-mocking quotations about a speaker's own group – their use erodes the worthy inhibition against brutality in public discourse' (*Manual*, p. 308).

On the surface these standards appear to be unimpeachably high and have contributed to the newspaper's credibility in the world of journalism. They help

to ensure that *The Times* provides information and news analyses that are unbiased and impartial, delivered in a sophisticated style whereby the newspaper is seen to have placed itself above the fray of social conflict. Nevertheless, questions arise as to how these standards might effectively limit certain forms of discourse and thereby stifle public debate (Conaway, 1999; Crimp, 1990; Kim, 2000). For example, does not perhaps the newspaper's emphasis on 'a fluid style' as opposed to that which is 'slangy' (*Manual*, p. viii) or 'coarse' (*Manual*, p. 240) militate against discursive styles that *are* 'slangy' or 'coarse'? If so, does the voice of groups that typically resort to 'slangy' or 'coarse' language make its way into the newspaper, and if so how is it represented? By the same token, what visibility is granted to subjective truths within an institution so rigorously committed to standards of objectivity? Will overtly biased truth claims that are not conveyed impartially or that are in need of additional interpretation find inclusion within 'all the news that is fit to print'? And in its unwillingness to print materials in a way that might offend some readers' moral sensibilities, might not the newspaper (however unwittingly) be aligning itself with some groups or institutions in opposition to others? What then becomes of claims or arguments that challenge, say, existing legal or institutional frameworks in ways that offend the moral sensibilities of (dominant) groups?

These kinds of question appear especially valid when considered in light of the journalistic work conducted in at least 278 African American-owned and operated newspapers printed across the United States (Owens, 1999). The black press *qua* 'fighting press' (Myrdal, 1944, p. 908) has affirmed the discontent of its 13 million readers with the mainstream press and shaped it into constructive non-violent opposition (Tuch and Weitzer, 1997). In this capacity the black press has provided information and interpretation otherwise deemed unfit to print by its mainstream counterparts. It has provided a sounding board for minority opinions that would not otherwise have been aired. And it has actively laid the semantic groundwork for critique of and active engagement with dominant groups and institutions not ordinarily found within the mainstream press. In these ways and others the black press has attempted to stimulate public dialogue not otherwise attempted by the mainstream press. Indeed, what bears noting here is that as worthy opposition to the mainstream press the black press may offer a critical perspective on the extent to which either authoritarian or emancipatory potentials are or are not realized – a perspective perhaps not readily available to mainstream press practitioners, readers or analysts, and especially so if they are caught up unknowingly in systematically distorted communication (e.g. Davis, 2005; Huspek, 2004; 2005; Ross and Camara, 2005).

In what follows I offer a brief stereoscopic analysis of the practices of two newspapers, *The New York Times* and its oppositional counterpart, the black-owned and operated *New York Amsterdam News*. The analysis examines contrastive dimensions between the two newspapers with special emphasis on how their respective practices facilitate or restrict expression and contestation of validity claims associated with truth, rightness and self-expression. More specifically, the analysis

offers a critical assessment of the extent to which both newspapers provide the widest range of discursive potential in the interest of opening the public sphere to a variety of validity claims. Do the two newspapers permit stylistic diversity of self-expression? Do they provide adequate space for competing truth claims? Are normative challenges to the legal-political order given a fair hearing? These questions are addressed by a contrastive reading of both New York-based newspapers' coverage of the 'same event' – here the police shooting of an unarmed, 22-year-old Guinean immigrant, Amadou Diallo, who was shot and killed after police officers fired at least 41 bullets and struck him 19 times – described as 'a major symbolic event in the history of the city' (Toobin, 2000, p. 38).

Expression in Styles of Reportage

Although both *The New York Times* and *Amsterdam News* raised criticism regarding the fatal shooting of Diallo, significant differences in style of coverage existed between the two newspapers. *The Times*, for example, frequently voiced criticism regarding any possible justification for 41 shots having been fired at an unarmed person. Yet, in keeping with the *Style Manual*'s guidelines, without exception reporters exhibited stylistic restraint and other 'markers of civility', thereby placing the newspaper above the fray of angry street talk.

> ... things are not always what they seem at first, a truism that can be forgotten in times of passion. But it seems worth bearing in mind in the stomach-wrenching death of Amadou Diallo, the unarmed African immigrant gunned down in the Bronx by four police officers who fired an almost inconceivable 41 bullets at him ... No one is suggesting that Mr Diallo did anything to warrant such a response, and it is obvious that something went terribly wrong. But charged words like 'murderers', 'massacre', and 'execution' have been casually tossed around in street protests ... While the anger is understandable, it is unclear how anyone can reach such damning conclusions based upon available evidence (Haberman, 1999, p. B1).

In contrast, the *Amsterdam News* draws no clear line between civil and 'uncivil' speech. In editorials and analytical reports blended together in common cause as openly strategic communication the newspaper produces a steady stream of hyperbole and invective aimed at the New York Police Department and Mayor Giuliani. With a foregrounding of 'highly charged words' of black activist leaders, references are made to the 'slaughter', 'execution' and 'assassination' of Diallo in the context of widespread 'acts of brutality' carried out by 'Giuliani's storm troopers' (Tatum, 1999a, p. 12). 'The New York Police Department's Street Crimes Units' (SCU), states protest leader Khallid Mohammed, 'are nothing more than organized death squads' (Reyes, 1999, p. 3). And the SCU is described further as 'a death squad coven of neo-fascist hit men in New York whose motto is "We own the night" ' (Baraka, 1999, p. 12). Drawing upon the language of the street, the black newspaper refers to the 'maniac in office', Mayor Giuliani, as 'Fuhrer Giuliani' and 'Dictator Giuliani', a 'weak lily-livered monster' who, like Dracula, 'wants to taste more blood' (Maddox, 1999, p. 13; Pryce, 1999, p. 4; Tatum, 1999b, p. 12). Over several weeks the hyperbolic attacks continued:

> Giuliani is a zero, zero in our book, for he has a license for his 40,000 minions who are called policemen to go out and murder anyone they like. It should not appear strange to you, or anyone else for that matter, that Giuliani's latter-day 'storm troopers' have not slaughtered a single person who is white ... Why is it so? We cannot answer that, but if Giuliani is such an expert at dispatching Black youngsters and Black adults – many who have done absolutely nothing – why, then, is it so difficult for him to demand the holding of white policemen who have been accused of murder by eyewitnesses? (Tatum, 1999a, p. 12).

'Cussin' out', 'abusing' and 'reading', all of which involve 'denigrating another to his or her face in an unsubtle and unambiguous manner' (Morgan, 1998, p. 263), are 'straightforward, unmitigated insults meant to be taken personally' (Spears, 2001, p. 246). Yet they are not meant to inflict emotional pain upon their target. Expressed by a historically oppressed group, the assumption is that the insult is being delivered 'uphill' so to speak, and therefore unlikely to hurt as an insult might that is rolled 'downhill' by a power-holding other. Nor is this directness meant to silence the targeted other, but to the contrary its intention is to shake up the other, to make them 'fightin' mad' (Brown, 1972) – mad enough perhaps even to acknowledge the sources of the 'read' and, ideally, fire back an exchange. As Geneva Smitherman has noted, 'Like it's not personal, it's business ... the business of playing in and with the Word' (Smitherman, 2000, p. 223); and the 'business' here is to open up dialogue where there has been none. Calling Rudy Giuliani a 'monster' or 'maniac', on this view, is an invitation for the mayor to enjoin in dialogue within a larger context where the *Amsterdam News* has been repeatedly told by the Mayor's Communication Director that 'It is not in our interest to talk with you' (interview, E. Tatum, 2004).

'All the News That's Fit to Print': Contrastive Truths

Differences in styles of discourse between the two newspapers raise questions as to the role of truth validity claims within each newspaper. For the *Amsterdam News*, the question is whether openly strategic communication must necessarily work at cross-purposes with the offering of truth validity claims, their content and the normatively based procedures for questioning or challenging them. For *The Times*, a different question is posed: can a mainstream newspaper that upholds a standard of stylistic restraint adequately represent truth claims and guarantee procedures for airing, questioning and challenging them when they are offered up by those who transgress the newspaper's institution-specific standards of discursive civility?

Here I note two important dimensions of contrast. First, the *Amsterdam News*' mission is to represent truthfully the world to its readers, but to do so in a way that 'opens things up whether readers agree or not' (interview, E. Tatum, 2004). In this sense the black newspaper neither claims to offer all the news that is fit to print, nor does it rigidly embrace an ideal of impartiality. Indeed, the assumption of its writers and editors appears to be that the newspaper's readers – most of whom

also read the mainstream press – expect biased reporting, and read the newspaper with the knowledge that another (albeit unstated) bias can be found in the counterweight of information, analysis and opinion of the mainstream press. And it is likely for this reason that the writers and editors of the *Amsterdam News* seem unconcerned that their rhetoric might perform a manipulative role in relation to its readers. A significant difference between the two newspapers is that although both exemplify biased reporting, only one admits it while its counterpart touts high standards of impartiality. By offering truth claims that it knows are contestable, and offering them in an emotionally charged manner that is meant to stimulate open contestation, the *Amsterdam News* assumes that a community actively engaged in sorting through unambiguously biased truth claims is preferable to one that believes itself to be reading a non-biased presentation of 'all the news that is fit to print'.

Second, there is some irony in that the *Amsterdam News* uses emotional language not simply to arouse its readers but also to stimulate reasoned assessment and debate with respect to officials' claims and the way they are presented in mainstream media. The black newspaper's truth validity claims, delivered in an emotionally arousing way, are meant primarily to provoke spirited and informed debate. In contrast, *The Times*' use of 'constructions that keep language neutral, a crystalline medium through which journalists report ideas without proclaiming stances' (*Manual of Style and Usage*, p. viii), may not only discourage emotional arousal but also stoke readers' fears of inflamed black citizen insurgency in real but undetected ways; for the position that excludes biased truth validity claims that are carried in emotionally highly charged constructions might well convey a conviction that such constructions exist beyond the pale of 'civil' discourse and thus pose a threat to civic order.[6]

'No Justice, No Peace!' Challenges to Authoritatively Backed Norms

If challenges to societal norms and the 'systemic inertia of institutional politics' (Habermas, 1996, p. 383) are adequately to be reflected upon and publicly discussed, they must often be conveyed through mass media wherein inhere both emancipatory and authoritarian potentials. Yet *The Times*' coverage of the shooting and its aftermath, in hundreds of articles, shows a newspaper steering through the Scylla of community disapprobation and the Charybdis of state-sanctioned order. The newspaper raises criticisms with respect to 41 shots being fired and seeks out facts that might shed light on the matter. It raises community-based grievances against the SCU's aggressive tactics, and in several analytical pieces Rudy Giuliani is called upon to open dialogue with black community leaders. Yet such probes and suggestions are offered without significant challenge to existing law and institutional arrangement. From the moment Diallo went down, for example, controversy swirled around his killers who were required by superiors to provide no verbal or signed statements, were administered no drug tests and were permitted to leave the scene of the shooting without being interviewed.

The newspaper laments the dearth of information regarding the case but in a way that always defers to the 48-hour rule's umbrella of protection for police officers. In this case, the officers' attorneys advised their clients to withhold all comment until the state pressed charges against them. But this provision, too, undergoes no scrutiny: 'the officers, like any other citizens, cannot be compelled to talk because of constitutional rights against self-incrimination' (Flynn, 1999, A38).

The *Amsterdam News*, in contrast, combines expressive style and biased truth validity claims in an effort to press beyond the constraining parameters of existing law and institutional arrangement – in this instance as both appeared to be used to fortify a 'blue wall of silence' behind which the officers were allowed to hide.

> If four policemen of African ancestry had wantonly executed a European immigrant anywhere in New York City with a hail of 41 bullets, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani would have instinctively snatched the badges from their chests and the lethal weapons from their hips before ordering them held incommunicado without bail at a local lockup. He would then assure all Europeans that punishment would be swift and certain (Maddox, 1999, p. 13).

> ... go downtown and shoot some cracker 41 times and see what happens (Alton Maddox, quoted in Boyd, 1999a, p. 3).

> If the 4 police officers had shot a horse in front of the Plaza Hotel, the whole city would be outraged (Rep. Charles Rangel, quoted in Boyd, 1999b, p. 1).

Differences between both newspapers in this area are significant in that they may reflect either an emancipatory or authoritarian impulse. Here it is worth noting John Dryzek's (1996, p. 476) comment that citizen pressures for greater democracy 'almost always emanate from civil society, rarely or never from the state itself'. And in this regard what we see is a community-based power that challenges the limits of state administrative power being channeled freely through the *Amsterdam News*, and much less so through *The Times*. In other words, discourse on existing laws and institutional arrangement is more imbued with questions and challenges in the former than in the latter.

Discussion

In response to his critics, Habermas has claimed that the normative force of communicative action within the bourgeois public sphere effectively counters the objectifying strains of strategic action that emanate from and sustain intrusive state, money or other power-based interests. The claim remains unredeemed, however, in that it lacks empirical demonstration of the mechanisms of conflict between communicative and strategic action, as well as the specific pathways by which the normative force of the former is said eventually to prevail. This is problematic for Habermas's thesis both empirically and conceptually. Historical evidence shows that long-standing exclusionary practices within the bourgeois

public sphere have been eliminated neither quickly nor completely; and Habermas's own concept of systematically distorted communication also raises concern about prolonged tension between communicative and strategic action. For in so far as the presence of systematically distorted communication within the bourgeois public sphere remains unrecognized for what it is by those who routinely reproduce it, there appears to be no guarantee that it can be disentangled from, or made eventually to bow to, the normative force of communicative action.[7]

A related difficulty for his thesis is its underestimation of those who are locked out of bourgeois publicness as a result of dominant's deployment of strategic action. Although Habermas acknowledges the difficulty, he has offered little to suggest how otherness as expressed by shadow publics might best be incorporated into his thesis. His suggestion that the dominant public sphere and alternative publics share aspects of communicative action and that porous boundaries ensure some degree of blend is intriguing but underdeveloped. Does the directional flow of communicative action move from dominant to alternative, or vice versa? And through what kinds of mechanism might the flow be either dammed up or released?

In taking up Habermas's call for a stereoscopic analysis that examines public sphere tensions between communicative and strategic action, I have argued that consideration of alternative publics is needed in light of Habermas's underestimation of exclusionary practices and possible misreading of the directional flow of both communicative forms. Otherness, as reflected in the communicative practices of alternative shadow publics, is viewed for what it may reveal as limits to realizations of communicative action within the dominant public sphere that may otherwise not be apparent either to participants or third-person observers. Second, the concentration on otherness is based on the possibility that there exist alternative tributaries of communicative practice that spring from alternative publics' ongoing struggles to speak and be heard in response to dominant's exclusionary tendencies. In this sense, otherness may not simply be a recipient of derived variants of communicative action as Habermas suggests, but rather asserts itself as a driving force that aims to remedy the silence inherent in systematically distorted communication that poses as communicative action.

The analysis can claim some success in both respects. Comparison and contrast of *The New York Times* and *Amsterdam News* coverage confirmed some of the 'working hypotheses' that emerged from consideration of the former's *Manual for Style and Usage*, specifically those relevant to expressive styles, truth validity claims and challenges to the normative bases of existing law, institutions and policies. Consideration of the *Amsterdam News* reveals a noteworthy range of exclusions on the part of *The Times* perhaps not otherwise apparent to either its practitioners or third-person observers. Stylistic nuance, slang and colloquialisms that have claimed a legitimate place within the African-American

rhetorical tradition and that are given a free rein within the black newspaper's coverage appear to find no entry point into the prestigious mainstream newspaper. Truth validity claims expressed through openly biased representations of reality of a type widely promulgated in the *Amsterdam News* are rarely, if ever, aired in *The Times*. And irreverent challenges to the political-legal order that are commonplace in the *Amsterdam News* are not given much of a hearing by its mainstream counterpart.

Exclusions such as these suggest a presence of systematically distorted communication at *The Times*, as tendencies to act upon the normative background conditions and procedures of communicative action are short-circuited by what appears to be an ideologically cast set of beliefs and practices. Consequently, all citizens are affected: an active community of dissenting citizens, effectively hived off from the body politic, feels compelled to voice opposition strategically in the most hyperbolic of terms; and the 'majority' is deprived of hearing a range of dissenting opinion that, in J. S. Mill's terms, carries the potential to elevate public discourse via examination of otherwise unexamined principles and beliefs, as well as either to correct prevailing falsehoods or strengthen already held convictions of truth or rightness.

The analysis does not restrict itself solely to the discourse of the other and the modes by which it is suppressed, but also draws upon Habermas's extensive work on normative background conditions and processes through which communicative action is exercised, and considers the possibility that precisely those openly strategic communicative forms and offerings found in the *Amsterdam News* but given no hearing in *The New York Times* may beckon readers toward realization of a closer approximation to the ideals of communicative action than the hidden strategic forms – viz. systematically distorted communication – that rationalize their exclusion. This is not to say that the contents of the *Amsterdam News*' communicative offerings are more sincere, true or just than those of *The Times*, as such considerations are best left for citizens to decide after reflection and debate.[8] Here emphasis is placed upon the normative background conditions and processes that are necessary if self-expression, truth and justice are to receive a free and open hearing. And in these respects, the *Amsterdam News* appears to outperform its mainstream counterpart. In bold, emotion-arousing strokes readers are notified where the writer fits within a universe of conflicting claims of truth and rightness. Opening salvos are launched with the intent to engage readers in the expectation that they will respond and so participate in an atmosphere of open contestation and debate. Truth validity claims, presented in a transparently biased manner, are meant not to provide closure to a set of questions or concerns but rather to crack open the confining parameters of the mainstream's impartiality and so unleash new dialogic possibilities. And claims of rightness, in so far as they challenge readers' sensibilities bound up with identifications with extant law and institutional power, strike at the very heart of collective repression, entreating subjects to reflect upon and discuss

validity claims that tend otherwise to go unvoiced within a taken-for-granted legal-institutional order.

The normative force of each of these facets of communication – self-expression, truth, rightness – is conveyed despite a bias that is worn on the writer's sleeve.[9] In this respect, strategically advanced validity claims, whether they are harnessed to individual or group interests, may be inconsistent with the norms of communicative action only to the extent that they close off opportunities for one or both interactants to question or challenge in open and free dialogue. And as this analysis has suggested, the motives expressed in the *Amsterdam News*' coverage are transparent in ways that open up dialogic possibilities that are missing in its mainstream counterpart's tendencies to suppress any revelation of its own biases through institutional standards of civility, impartiality and moral sensibility.

Conclusion

This article has not meant to suggest that an overhaul of Habermas's discourse-centered theoretical approach is in order, but indeed has relied heavily upon it throughout. Nevertheless, the article has suggested that Habermas's thesis regarding the bourgeois public sphere needs to be redirected with focus placed upon the counter-practices of those who believe themselves to be locked out from 'legitimate' public discourse. Redirection is necessary not only as a precondition for discerning how sources of communicative action may perhaps have dried up within the bourgeois public sphere, but also as an indispensable means of exploring real emancipatory alternatives that spring up as voices from the bottom of the well, oriented to reaching understanding, and expressed in the assumption that people's upward struggles against power and domination have not yet been completed. To state that such discourse-based alternatives are (mere) derivatives of a source of communicative action (that may or may not still be available) risks giving credence to the idea that the alternatives are secondary to the bourgeois public sphere, mere afterthoughts that are to be considered important only to the extent they share that which emerged at one historical moment in bourgeois struggles against absolutism. The analysis conducted here suggests that alternative public spheres be viewed as possible originating sources of discursive action that spring forth spontaneously from people's needs as they address unjust life conditions that confront them.

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Notes

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1 Bohman (1996, p. 110) notes a vicious cycle that can occur when dominant groups develop practices that rationalize the exclusion of subordinate groups from public sphere participation, and then turn silence into 'consent'. Others (Kim, 2000; Mendelberg, 2001) have discussed how pernicious ideologies are used in subtle ways that exclude subordinate groups and are veiled in ways that discourage critical reflection among those who apply them.

2 Snyder (2000, pp. 36–56) discusses how elites may feel threatened by increased pressures to democratize as well as the strategic tactics adopted by less powerful groups in response to elites' 'persuasive' attempts to forestall further democratization. For additional discussions of the communicative tactics of excluded groups, see Eyerman and Jamison (1991); Herbst (1994); James (2004); McAdam (1982).

3 'Whereas in systematically distorted communication at least one of the participants deceives *himself* about the fact that the basis of consensual action is only apparently being maintained, the manipulator deceives at least one of the *other* participants about his own strategic attitude, in which he *deliberately* behaves in a pseudoconsensual manner' (Habermas 1979, p. 210, emphases in original).

4 James (2004, p. 85) suggests that Habermas's conceptual distinction between communicative and strategic action may be too brittle as an analytical device in the face of complex entanglements of the two communicative forms in empirical settings.

5 Elster (1998) offers a number of instances when resort to manipulation in the public sphere may be constrained in the face of shared communicative norms.

6 Mendelberg (2001) and Kim (2000) both offer accounts of how the 'civility' of 'colorblind' talk is used to discourage 'uncivil' challenges that point to the relevance of race. See also Huspek's discussion (2004) of a mainstream newspaper's uses of symbolic violence in its descriptions of the 'fiery rhetoric' of African-American leaders in the United States.

7 It is on account of the entanglement perhaps that so many have tended to emphasize the political force of strategic action not only as it emanates from dominant groups but from oppositional groups as well. See, for example, Berger (1983); Gunson and Collins (1997); Heller (1984); Honneth (1991); Joas (1988).

8 Indeed, as studies by Cho (1993), Conaway (1999), Kim (2000) and Snyder (2000) suggest, there may be contexts in which the offerings of subordinate groups may fall short of expanding democracy in ways that more closely approximate the norms of communicative action. Such unhappy instances seem to be more likely when social conflict spills beyond a simple dominant vs. subordinate dichotomy – e.g. when contestation between multiple ethnic groups adds to social complexity.

9 If I understand Habermas correctly, to enter a communicative context with a set of strategic interests and an intention to motivate others to adopt it is not necessarily at odds with communicative action. What sets off strategic action from communicative action is not one's interests or aims but whether or not one shows a willingness truthfully, sincerely and appropriately to advance validity claims, to entertain another's validity claims, to respect the normative procedures of communicative action and to alter one's position when confronted with a better argument.

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