Chapter 16
Chewing the Communal Cud:
Community Deliberation in Broadsheet
Letters and Political Blogs

Jane Mummery
University of Ballarat, Australia

Debbie Rodan
Edith Cowan University, Australia

ABSTRACT

Contending that media users are more than consumers and that the mass media are able to achieve more in the public sphere than simply meet market demand, Mummery and Rodan argue in this chapter that some types of mass media may in fact fulfil public sphere responsibilities. The authors demonstrate how forums such as broadsheet letters to the editor and online political blogs—despite their commonly recognised limitations due to influence by private/commercial ownership, editorship, and the requirements of authorship—may exemplify, enable and support community deliberation over issues of public concern. More specifically, via engaging with Jürgen Habermas’ conceptions of the necessary conditions for rational and communal deliberation, and critically examining recent debates in these forums, the authors argue both that these mediated forums can enable and exemplify community deliberation and, more generally, that community deliberation itself does not need to be strictly consensus-oriented to be productive.

INTRODUCTION

Communities need to chew their cud; they need their members to not only publicly and critically deliberate and debate what matters to them—whether via gossip, public meetings, social activism or democratic deliberation—but resolve disputes and come to rational and defensible agreed-upon decisions, decisions that in turn impact upon and establish a sense of collective agreement and, indeed, community. These kinds of communal and dialogic involvements of individuals in discussion and decision-making have also been recognized as key to practices of deliberative democracy (see, e.g., Bohman & Rehg, 1997; Chambers, 2003; Fishkin, 1991). Dewey (1927), for instance, has contended that inquiry and communication are the basis for democratic society and has stressed the
merits of group deliberation over the decisions of any single individual. Such a view is also held by Jürgen Habermas, who additionally contends that the inquiry and communication making up group deliberation should be carried out in accordance with “norms of reasonable public dialogue” (Dzur, 2002, p. 323).

The question however, is how these “norms of reasonable public dialogue” should be understood, and how this process can best be supported, given it requires specific attributes from not only individual participants but social, political and technological systems and institutions. This chapter cannot hope to tackle all of these issues and their various nuances; instead it will concentrate on the role of one particular institution – that of the mass media – and how it can be understood as supportive of these norms. It will, in other words, consider how the mass media may exemplify, enable and support community deliberation. Just what we understand by ‘community deliberation’ here needs clarification. There are several alternative proposals according to which these terms can be understood, ranging from McMahon’s (2001) conception of ‘collective reasoning’ to Yearwood and Stranieri’s (2009) conception of ‘reasoning community’. In this instance, however, whilst it seems that our discussion is indeed of a reasoning community, to use Yearwood and Stranieri’s term, we will be drawing on the broad conceptions of deliberation and the public sphere, or Öffentlichkeit, developed and revised by Habermas (1989; 1998; 2006). Although these conceptions have often been critiqued for their utopian nature – critics seeing them as setting impossibly high and/or exclusionary standards for deliberation (e.g. Fraser, 1992; Schudson, 1997) – we contend Habermas provides a useful outline of the required procedures and standards for both a well-functioning public sphere and rational, communal deliberation. We do however accept that these procedures and standards operate in the way of ideals, a point highlighted by what we see as the most useful aspect of Habermas’ delineation: that, being the statement of procedural conditions, it remains formal and empty of content. On this basis, then, we will be drawing on Habermas’ conceptions of the necessary conditions for rational and communal deliberation to evaluate two of the sites offered by the mass media for public deliberation: letters to the editor and political blogs. First, however, we need to outline the relations envisaged by Habermas to hold between his conceptions of the mass media, the public sphere and public deliberation.

MASS MEDIA, THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE IDEAL OF DELIBERATION

Envisaged as “the space between civil society and the state in which citizens can debate issues of common concern” (Haas, 2004, p. 179), the Habermasian public sphere, as initially outlined in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, is not only required to be a space in which all citizens can participate freely and equally, but free from explicit governmental or commercial interference. The Habermasian conception further rests on two key points. First, he assumes that the public should actively deliberate and not merely be “informed” (Haas, 2004, p. 179). Second, and relatedly, he assumes that such deliberation is necessary for quality popular participation in liberal-democratic society (Calhoun, 1992, pp. 1-4), and indeed that the outcomes of such deliberation can “in part hold governments to account” (Garnham, 2007, p. 206). The corollary of this is his assumption that decisions made on behalf of a democratic society should be neither simply handed down by some higher state authorities nor the result of “rubber-stamp[ing]” the needs of a capitalist economic system (Garnham, 2007, p. 206). Instead the society as a whole needs some way of collectively making decisions that affect the society as a whole. Citizens, in other words, need to make and debate “genuine choices” and nut-out genuine “dilemmas” (Garnham, 2007, p. 206), and