By employing the theory of deliberative democracy, Habermas provides a critical assessment of the effects of the media on citizens’ deliberation. His premises, if modified, can also supply the basis for a positive argument for dispersing media power more widely as a way to improve deliberative practices. Contrary to Habermas, however, the epistemic dimension of deliberation should be cast in terms of error avoidance rather than “truth tracking.” Error avoidance is best achieved through the availability of the full range of social perspectives. On empirical and normative grounds, deliberation in heterogeneous groups is the best means for avoiding cognitive errors and biases and for improving the quality of political communication.

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When compared with many other democratic theories, deliberative democracy demands much of citizens and institutions. But should these demands be met to some approximate extent, deliberative theorists claim that decisions made under these conditions will be more likely not only to be fairer but also to be better informed and well-reasoned enough, as Habermas (2006) put it, to “track the truth.” But could such conditions ever be met? In Political Communication in Media Societies, Habermas not only defends the feasibility of the deliberative ideal but also uses it critically to assess the problems for the quality of deliberation in media societies. The balance of the argument is rather more critical than affirmative: Although research and experiments such as deliberative polls give strong evidence for the positive effects of properly structured deliberation on political will formation, the power of the media to shape political discussion and alternatives has a strong negative impact on the epistemic potential for deliberation. Because I am in substantial agreement with this argument, I will here offer a somewhat different account of the epistemic dimension of deliberation and attempt to show that the cognitive potentials of group deliberation can lead to a more optimistic picture of the prospects for
deliberative democracy. This depends on a different interpretation of the epistemic dimension of deliberation: It should be regarded in the first instance as “error avoiding” rather than “truth tracking.” As many group-based studies show, this potential depends on the epistemic value of diversity.

As Habermas (2006) points out, it is striking that much of the empirical literature, inspired by Kahneman, Tversky, and Slovic’s (1982) well-known experimental work, has been largely skeptical about the potentials of human reasoning, showing the myriad of ways in which actual human decision makers systematically violate the strictures of rationality. Because their choices and decisions may be better explained by various heuristics and biases, practices and ideals based on the assumption of rationality are seen as making unrealistic demands of decision makers, who are subject to framing effects, attribution errors, confirmation bias, the base rate fallacy, and so on. More recently, however, some philosophers, psychologists, and social scientists have called into question these results. Instead of challenging the rationality of agents, the results challenge a particular individualistic theory of rationality (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999; Hurley, 2005). In the right social environments, “heuristics can make us smart.”

These distributed and interactive accounts of cognition show how deliberating in heterogeneous groups improves its quality by making deliberators less susceptible to cognitive errors and biases. Druckman’s (2004) experimental work, for example, illustrates that framing effects are not permanent and inaccessible features of human cognition but can lose their effects given interpersonal discussion and the offering of alternative frameworks in discussion. Such counterframing is more likely to occur “when the discussion group is heterogeneous, including participants who have initially been exposed to different frames, as this will likely lead to the introduction of alternative perspectives” (p. 674). By contrast, discussion among like-minded people “might reiterate the frames, resulting in an exaggerated effect.” If this and other studies are correct, the presence of multiple, variegated perspectives is a necessary condition for the epistemic improvement of deliberation precisely because it reduces those cognitive errors to which homogeneous groups are most vulnerable, even if the group consists of experts. We might say this positive effect upon deliberation is due to the epistemic benefits of diversity.

From Plato to Madison, there is a long tradition of arguments against populist democracy, often in terms of the epistemic superiority of experts or the propertied elite. In response, deliberative democrats point out that the deliberation of all is not only demanded by the ideal of political equality but also important for effective problem solving. If deliberative democracy is to be defended epistemically, it must be shown that the deliberation of all is superior to the deliberation of any subset of citizens. These benefits are not based on the superiority of collective reasoning as such or the superiority of deliberation over aggregative voting but rather on collective reasoning in diverse bodies of citizens. To be successful, this line of argument must identify those benefits of diversity for public communication and testing that are available only through democratic norms of inclusion. It might also ask what the
relevant dimension of diversity is for such epistemic improvement. Recent experimental work on deliberation is instructive, once we see the point of deliberation in terms of reducing error rather than in terms of maximizing the truth.

Mill (1989) thought that we ought to promote diversity as a corrective to limitations in judgment. So long as human judgment “can be set right when it is wrong, reliance can be placed on it only when the means of setting it right are kept constantly at hand” (p. 20). Contrary to Mill, the object of such inclusion ought in the first instance to be citizens’ perspectives rather than the diversity of their opinions and interests. Once we achieve both a diverse public and a differentiated institutional framework for democratic inquiry, they constitute the main mechanism that promotes Mill’s property of good human judgment and deliberation: results that are revisable and open to testing from diverse perspectives, some of which are “new truths” and may not yet have become publicly known. When tested from a variety of perspectives, decisions become more robust, a goal that is also found in scientific practices when confirmation from a variety of independent techniques and theories strengthen evidential weight.

But what are the relevant features of heterogeneous deliberation? First, the diversity of perspectives, I argue, is not reducible to differences in opinions or interests but is rather due to the distributed character of social knowledge and experience in modern societies across perspectives. This suggests an “epistemic difference principle,” in which the diversity of perspectives, rather than of opinions or values, ought to be maximized to improve the condition of the least-well-off deliberators. Second, such conditions mean that the relevant experiential knowledge that informs reasons is distributed in such a way that the inclusion of new perspectives changes the pool of available reasons to be used as premises in reasoning about common problems. Rather than values or opinions as such, perspectives are the proper dimensions along which to measure heterogeneity. Apart from obvious conflicts of opinions and values at the discursive level, there is also a diversity of perspectives in any complex and pluralistic society, afforded by different social positions primarily emerging from the range and type of experience. Such experiences form the basis of a practical point of view shared by some but not all citizens, even if they do not explicitly regard themselves as members of a specific group. Perspectives are thus not reducible to any particular set of values and opinions but are the experiential source of them.

Although it is true that promoting diversity of all three kinds (of opinions, values, and perspectives) is beneficial to the deliberative process, epistemic diversity of the right kind, the diversity of perspectives, is most helpful in deliberation. Other kinds of diversity are not sufficient for achieving these benefits and promoting diversity simpliciter underestimates the difficulties of conflict for deliberation.

The epistemic motivation in selecting such a difference principle need not be to directly aim at better outcomes so much as at avoiding some bad ones. This is because the relevant aspect of diversity that is necessary for improving the process of deliberation is not the pool of reasons as such but the availability of the perspectives that inform these reasons and give them their cogency. The pool of reasons can be
increased even while still leaving out relevant perspectives. But the presence of diverse perspectives is most important in shaping some outcome that is not available prior to deliberation. Before a reason can first be seen as a reason and then potentially as one that passes the critical scrutiny of all citizens, the perspectives of others and the experiences that inform them must be recognized as legitimate; in light of the inclusion of their perspective, groups are able to get uptake when they offer reasons and thus recognize for themselves that they are contributing to democratic decisions.

Moreover, given the variety of topics of deliberation, it is not possible to decide in advance which among the potential candidate perspectives ought to be included. Deliberation is then not just about offering and assessing our own reasons but considering the reasons of others. This means that even as we take up a practical stance informed by our experiences and practical knowledge, we also are able to take account of the perspectives of others to some degree or another, such as when we see previously unconvincing reasons as convincing or when we change our minds. Changing our minds collectively is often simply the result of having a new perspective distributed among those deliberating in such a way as to change what is salient and what is not.

If this provides the proper interpretation of the experimental results of Druckman (2004) and others, the need for diverse perspectives has important consequences for institutional design. One possibility for correcting this deficit is to organize deliberation self-consciously by convening and empowering “minipublics” (Fung, 2003). Whether chosen randomly or as representatives of the body of citizens as a whole, such procedures ought to avoid the problem of self-selection typically found in the use of civil society organizations for this purpose. Minipublics offer one feasible, constructive strategy for getting beyond the dilemma of insider consultation and outsider contestation that is a structural feature of civil society activity in current institutional arrangements. Because minipublics are self-consciously created and seek either to include all the relevant stakeholders or to convene a broad sample of citizens, they do not directly rely on representation as the mode of communicating interests. To give just a few examples, citizen assemblies have been empowered as minipublics to propose electoral reform in British Columbia, adjudicate environmental disputes in Australia and other places, and much more.

Minipublics provide opportunities for empowered participation, where groups of citizens, not experts or office holders, are given specific normative powers to deliberate and form opinions and to make recommendations and decisions. The advantage is that such smaller publics are able to deliberate within specific institutional, functional, and temporal constraints in ways that the public at large cannot. Rather than simply a form of consultation, this form of deliberation would require that institutions transfer some of their decision-making authority to the minipublic whose deliberation it empowers, thereby opening up a directly deliberative process within the institution that includes as many perspectives as possible and can be repeated when necessary. The use of randomly selected citizens for empowered deliberation also increases the heterogeneity of participation and with it the
epistemic qualities of deliberation, even if their decision must ultimately find popular and democratic ratification in the citizenry as a whole.

The second lesson for deliberative design is to promote diversity in institutional settings for deliberation, to the extent that it issues in decisions according to a variety of different procedures. Rather than have deliberative reform be based on having each forum approximate a single institutional ideal, democratic practice is better served by overall institutional pluralism, in which there are a variety of overlapping and mutually checking procedures, each formulated according to its contribution to the division of decision making and epistemic labor within the system of deliberation as a whole. In this way, optimal deliberation is not a property of each individual forum, to the extent that democracy requires collective agents rather than merely publics. It is rather a matter of interaction among and testing across institutionally structured deliberative bodies that yield epistemic gains and self-correction. It is not that there is some one of them, say the legislature, that can best stand in for the whole or that somehow better or more closely approximates the ideal procedure.

The benefits of diversity in improving deliberation only accrue in systems that institutionalize diverse forms of deliberation in different types of forums at various levels of organization. As in the case of minipublics, such institutions work best when they aim to maximize the available perspectives in deliberation and also to use other forums or collective agents to check those decisions by distributing deliberative labor. It would seem, then, that designing institutions with the appropriate cognitive division of labor allows even complex societies to reap the benefits of smaller group deliberation by using the diversity of perspectives as the appropriate measure for the composition of any deliberating body. The single-perspective institutions of the state with their concentrated forms of political authority are not the best way to organize democracy epistemically. Multiperspectival institutions do not eliminate the need for a media system and media power in Habermas’s sense, but it does attenuate some of their worst effects on public deliberation.

Consider two examples of the epistemic benefits of diverse perspectives. Just as in arguments for the superiority of deliberation by a few, considerations of objectivity in democratic theory often suggest that certain perspectives are better than others, and the point of deliberation is to figure out which ones are somehow more likely to be correct or authentic. The point of inclusion, however, is not to find the right perspective but to have such perspectives interact and inform each other, and in that way open up deliberation, as it is currently constituted, to correction. Various experiments have been constructed to show how subjects find solutions to problems through novel information that is accessible only through the uptake of the perspectives of others. It could be argued that such correction occurred in the early days of the HIV epidemic when patients had no say about the regime for testing experimental drugs. Here, the weakness of homogeneity among deliberators is apparent, even when those deliberators are experts. From the perspective of patients, the highest possible standards of statistical significance in random controlled trials were simply unacceptable as a social policy. In deliberation that included the perspectives of
patients (who also make up the pool of participants in tests and as such must restrict their use of other possible remedies), doctors, researchers, and policy makers, standards of statistical validity were balanced with other values such as quicker availability of drugs, safety, and effectiveness. In a similar case, Agarwal (2002) has studied the effects of the exclusion of the perspective of women from deliberation on community forestry groups in India and Nepal. Because women had primary responsibility for wood gathering in their search for cooking fuel, they possessed greater knowledge of what sort of gathering was sustainable and about the location of trees that needed protection. Mixed groups of deliberators thus promote superior outcomes in implementation due to the presence of deliberation-enhancing epistemic diversity.

Finally, with this idea of epistemic diversity in mind, I conclude by returning to Habermas’s critical use of deliberative democratic theory in evaluating the current media system and its special “media power.” Here, we can see that the lack of differentiation of the media system from the market or the political system certainly violates the conditions for rational deliberation. But this functionally independent system exerts powers in ways that are unavoidable, including agenda setting and the framing of issues. To overcome the tensions in democratic legitimacy inherent in this inevitable media power, it is necessary to make possible a feedback relationship between the media system and a responsive civil society in the joint construction of public opinion by the media, elites, and ordinary citizens. This account provides the proper normative criteria for a well-functioning media system in a democracy, including sufficient reflexivity and the empowerment of citizens and associations in this process. Ultimately, however, the media system must not only empower but also act as a filter through which influence can be channeled and exercised. But is this process sufficient for deliberative democracy? The difficulty is that the media plays too big a role in defining the boundaries of deliberation and in this way reduces its potential for error reduction. Because the idea of rationality seems to be tied to a variety of different institutional contexts and forms, the same may be true of the media, so that its differentiation into a variety of settings that include the Internet may not be bad for deliberation.

If media power is exercised in differentiated and distributed way, then the media at the very least have the role of intermediary in a deliberative democracy. But this role is, as Habermas notes, fraught with difficulties when it promotes deliberation and mixes its own power to shape discussion with the role of the public itself in defining its own opinions in a normative rather than a merely statistical sense. Given the role that I have given to perspectives, it would be difficult for the media system not to filter out some perspectives ex ante, especially when public deliberation is exercised to influence the parliamentary complex in which political opinions are translated into public power. It would seem that media power plays too great a role in registering and transmitting public opinion. But the media system that plays this role has grown up with the modern state; it is based on that particular concentration of power typical of the modern state, which in turn may not be the best way to organize public deliberation democratically, at least not exclusively.
Republicanism has long been concerned with such problems and suggests the dispersal of power as a way to promote democracy in large, complex polities. In general, the republican argument for federalism suggests that democracy flourishes with the dispersal of power, where one virtue of a large, well-ordered republic is that it is multileveled, so that the lower units may effectively govern themselves and be more responsive to local and minority demands. If the media system is not merely to be aligned with elite democracy, institutional differentiation is required to produce a variety of collective agents constituted according to different kinds of procedures. In these cases, it is necessary to understand agents and publics in a distributive rather than a collective sense, where publics and agents interact with each other, crossing and joining different perspectives. In optimal deliberation, we can expect that the continual inclusion of new perspectives will feedback upon the conditions of deliberation itself, using normative and institutional constraints to change these very same constraints in problematic situations. Democratic practice is better served by institutional pluralism, in which there is a variety of overlapping and mutually checking procedures, each formulated according to its contribution to the division of decision making and epistemic labor within the system of deliberation as a whole. The benefits of diversity in improving deliberation require the epistemic difference principle put in practices across many different institutions.

When collective agents are designed distributively and deliberatively, the best organization of the public sphere is as a “public of publics” rather than as a distinctively unified and encompassing public sphere in which all communicators participate. Here, there is also clear analogy to current thinking on human cognition. The conception of rationality employed in most traditional theories tends to favor hierarchical structures, where reason is a higher order executive function. One might argue that this is the only real possibility, given that collective reasoning can only be organized hierarchically, in a process in which authority resides at only one highest level. If the recent work on rationality with which I began is to be our guide, then deliberation would best be promoted in a distributed rather than a hierarchical conception of the public sphere. The benefit of such a distributed system is that it can overcome some of the cognitive limitations of centralized decision processes, even while making the kind of opportunity for publics to influence decisions possible at multiple locations. This institutional structure suggests that democratic politics provides the forum in which publics act as intermediaries among civil society, markets, and formal political institutions. In the absence of intermediaries, such a structure may make it difficult for citizens to translate deliberation of intermediaries and thus for citizens to translate deliberative outcomes into political influence in various domains. A public sphere of citizens is still a requirement of such a differentiated media and decision-making system, if only to avoid the cognitive problems of fragmentation. However, the single-perspective institutions of the state with their concentrated forms of political authority are not the best way to organize democracy epistemically; the rationality of such institutions is easily overwhelmed by deep conflicts and the diversity of environments for problem solving. Once we
abandon older models of rationality, which have no answer to the tendencies of individuals to cognitive error, the full recognition of the epistemic value of diversity opens up new institutional possibilities for both opinion and will formation in deliberative democracy. In my comments, I have sought to add to and extend Habermas’s arguments concerning the rationality of group deliberation to the broader problems of democratic institutions in a media society.

Notes

1 Druckman argues that expertise can have a moderating effect through group demands for cognitive sophistication, as does the simple demand for explicit justification as such. However, these effects are not as robust as discussion in a heterogeneous group.
2 For a fuller development of the argument of this section, see Bohman (2003).
3 For an argument for this principle of institutional differentiation as promoting optimal deliberation, see Bohman (2007), Chap. 4.

References