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COMPREHENSIVE EXAMINATION

AREA #1

**"THE ROLE AND REFORM OF THE MASS MEDIA
IN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACIES"**

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While the mass media have long been normatively linked to the functional requirements of democratic societies (Altschull 1990; Hardt 1993; Lee 1995), recent developments in the theory and practice of *deliberative democracy* (Cohen 1997) have renewed attention to this complex link. In contrast to elitist, technocratic, and other models of democracy (Macpherson 1972; Held 1996), deliberative democracy assumes that public decisions ought to be grounded in substantial and informed public discussion – or deliberation – in which decision makers openly consider the diverse perspectives and collective interests of the citizenry when weighing the merits of any given course of action (Fishkin 1991; Christiano 1997). In any community or population that is too large to assemble together in a common physical space, practical constraints dictate that such deliberation must be facilitated, at least in part, by the media of mass communication (Hagen 1992; Dahlgren 1995). However, if the mass media are to adequately support these deliberative processes, many media critics and analysts agree that media reform will be necessary.

Building on the foundational concepts of deliberative democracy alluded to above, as well as a general grounding in the sociology and political-economy of the mass media (e.g., Shoemaker and Reese 1996), this comprehensive examination will survey a range of normative media theories and the reforms they prescribe in relation to the goals of deliberative democracy. It takes as its mandate McQuail's (1992) observations regarding the timeliness and necessity of developing a more adequate base of normative theory at a time of considerable change and reconstruction of media institutions.

For the purposes of analysis, the range of normative theory covered within this comprehensive examination will be broadly categorized according to two general theoretical orientations that attribute the media's democratic shortcomings to either cultural or structural factors (Dervin and Clark 1993). The former include culturally learned and transmitted norms, habits, beliefs, etc. The latter include structurally imposed political, economic, and institutional incentives and constraints. Each of these general bodies of theory will, in turn, be mapped out according to various representative approaches within it. As is the case with all such conceptual categorizations, a range of theory also exists that clearly acknowledges the importance of both cultural and structural factors – and these will also be discussed.

In mapping out the diverse cultural approaches to media reform, a logical starting point is with those theories that focus on the culture of journalism itself. The classic twentieth century thinking in this area is *social responsibility* theory, which asserts that the freedom of the press carries with it concomitant obligations to carry out certain essential communication functions in a democratic society which include, among other things, providing essential public information and a forum for discussion and debate regarding public affairs. In turn, most articulations of social responsibility theory have prescribed, as the term "responsibility" suggests, that the fulfillment of these obligations should be

2

realized primarily through an internally motivated journalistic commitment to social responsibility ideals (Nerone, Guback et al. 1995). Other more contemporary critics of the culture of journalism point to the need to reform the mindless adversarialism and cynical mistrust that characterizes journalistic culture, and that journalists in turn have cultivated in the public itself (Fallows 1997).

Closely related to social responsibility theory are theories of journalistic ethics. These theories derive ethical codes from moral philosophy in an effort to link journalism with the functional support of democratic processes (Winkler 1996; Traber 1997). Such theorists thus seek media reform through the reform of the ethical codes that underlie media practices.

Another cultural approach to media reform is embodied in the recently emerging *public journalism* movement – a movement that has stimulated considerable theory as well as practical experimentation in an effort to engage citizens in public affairs by facilitating a more citizen-centred public discourse (Rosen 1991). Public journalism is particularly noteworthy in this context for its explicit commitment to the ideals of deliberative democracy (Rosen 1997). As a movement grounded largely within the newsroom, public journalism also has counterparts in more broadly based social movements that have arisen in recent years with the specific goal of democratizing the media (White 1995).

Recent theoretical developments within the field of public relations – itself a major force in shaping contemporary media content – constitute yet another cultural approach to media reform. These developments are most clearly expressed in recent attention to the concept of *communication symmetry* in the scholarly literature on public relations (Pearson 1989). Specifically, the formulation of a *two-way symmetrical model* of public relations and its adoption by a small but growing number of practitioners in the field constitutes a rethinking of source-media relations with significant implications for media reform along deliberative/democratic lines (Grunig 1989).

A final set of cultural approaches to media reform are rooted in concerns about the competence of individual citizens on the one hand and about the adequacy of contemporary cultural belief systems on the other. The democratic competency of citizens has long been debated by political philosophers and others, and a citizen-centred approach to media reform assumes that media reform must begin with the education of citizens (Aronowitz 1993). After all, the media largely give the people what they want – or so the argument goes – so in order to reform the media the democratic expectations and competencies of the citizenry must first be cultivated. More subtle but related conceptualizations of this problem focus on cultural belief systems rather than individuals as the units of analysis. One such approach concerns itself with shortcomings of the reigning cultural paradigm and suggests that media reform ultimately depends on the reform of the societal paradigm that influences and informs processes of mainstream media production (Meadows 1991). In contrast to the ideological neutrality of the paradigm concept, other theorists offer an essentially similar critique, but articulated in terms of dominant political and economic interests and their hegemonic expression within and throughout culture – a critique that constitutes the subtext of many of the works cited below. In both cases, meaningful media reform is closely linked to the simultaneous reform – either through education and critical awareness raising or through oppositional hegemonic struggle – of entire cultural belief systems.

In mapping the diverse structural approaches to media reform, a logical starting point is with fundamental political-economy critiques. For instance, some theorists point out that existing class structures are powerful impediments to citizenship in general and to the democratic functioning of the media in particular (Golding 1990). The obvious implications of such analyses are that democratic media reform cannot proceed in a

meaningful manner unless and until existing class structures are recast into a more egalitarian social order.

Closely related but more media-specific political-economy critiques focus on the issue of ownership and the associated regulatory frameworks (or lack thereof) that shape media industries. In relation to the ideals of deliberative democracy, many critical media theorists agree that traditional market-liberalism has failed to create a media system characterized by the representation and exchange of diverse opinions, interests, and values – an exchange that is a core element of any deliberative process (Bruck and Raboy 1989; Wasko 1992). Proposals to reform media ownership and regulation thus tend to advocate the democratic necessity of some form of public service or public access media (Kellner 1990; Keane 1991), sometimes in combination with a plurality of other civic, social, professional, and private media forms (Curran 1996).

Inseparable from issues of ownership and regulatory frameworks are the specific influences of advertising on commercially operated media systems. The public service proposals referred to above are, of course, designed in part to circumvent the effects of advertising on the media. Other communication scholars that have studied the implications of advertising on democracy have proposed a range of advertising taxation and regulation schemes that could be imposed on commercial media systems in order to enhance their democratic functioning (Baker 1994).

A growing body of political-economy scholarship has also turned its attention to the phenomena of globalism and its implications for the democratization of the media. Within this body are theorists who suggest a need to revisit the structural reforms advocated in the 1970s through the New World Information and Communication Order policy discussions (Jakubowicz 1993); to restructure international communication policy in more politically emancipatory forms – as opposed to the corporatist/commercial structure that now dominates (Winseck and Cuthbert 1997); and to adopt a *People's Communication Charter*, based on principles of democratic empowerment, as a basis for future international communication policy (Hamelink 1995).

While the above distinctions between cultural and structural approaches to media reform each provide useful conceptual lenses for highlighting distinct features of what is ultimately an exceedingly complex reality, a number of scholars have clearly synthesized both cultural and structural approaches in their works. For instance, Page (1996) suggests the need for both cultural and structural reforms, derived from his *theory of constructed deliberation*, that range from increasing the critical awareness of individual media consumers to breaking up monopoly control over political information. Through a nuanced analysis of the regime of news objectivity, Hackett and Zhao (1998) suggest a range of cultural and structural approaches to democratic reform – from activist strategies such as *culture jamming* and *guerilla media*, to journalistic re-evaluations of the regime of objectivity, to media policy reform – that may all have to be pursued simultaneously in order to bring about meaningful change.

Finally, no survey of democratic media theory would be complete without reference to the constellation of theory surrounding Habermas' public sphere (1974), which also bridges, in many ways, the cultural and structural approaches outlined above. The value of this work lies not simply in Habermas' original conceptualization of the term, which has been widely critiqued and has also evolved over time in his own writing (Habermas 1994). The value of this work lies rather in the remarkable normative as well as heuristic power of a concept that has steadily engaged theorists of diverse political orientations and theoretical traditions for several decades now and shows no signs yet of exhaustion (Dahlgren 1991; Calhoun 1992).

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Date: Sept. 18, 1996

**COMPREHENSIVE EXAM QUESTIONS ON THE ROLE & REFORM OF THE MASS MEDIA
IN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACIES**

Choose TWO of the following questions. Each answer should be limited to about 2500 words. NOTE: The questions somewhat overlap, offering different ways of addressing the same broad concerns: please make your selections and frame your answers to cover a broad range of literature, and to minimize repetition.

(Also, please retype the question you are addressing at the head of your essay, for the convenience of your geographically dispersed examining committee. Could you include a copy of this sheet when you mail your answers to Bob Anderson?)

1) In your own view, what are the major or most decisive influences on the production of news texts, and on the role of news media in democratic political discourse? Are the functions and texts of news media open and negotiable, or to the contrary, relatively closed and (pre)determined?

OR (ALTERNATIVE WORDING FOR #1):

Assess the relative merits of cultural and structural approaches to explaining the production, texts ("content"), and democratic functioning of news media.

2) Discuss the link between explanatory and normative models of the media. Can we make a meaningful distinction between the two? Are they inevitably intertwined, so that explanatory frameworks explicitly or implicitly embody value preferences, no matter how "neutral" they may seem, while normative models incorporate assumptions about how media actually work? Discuss with reference to several different models or theories.

3) With respect to several normative models, including public journalism and the "communication symmetry" approach to public relations, discuss whether they are genuinely models of communicative emancipation -- or do they embody hidden purposes of domination? In particular, to what extent do these approaches exemplify -- or fall short of -- Habermas' concept of the public sphere?

4) Briefly outline the concept of deliberative democracy, and outline and defend your own perspective on the kinds of reforms (to the mass media -- and/or their cultural, social, political and economic "environment") needed to realize and sustain it in practice. Discuss with reference to the various models and traditions you have examined.