PUBLIC SPHERE ALIENATION:

A MODEL FOR ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

KATHERINE R. KNOBLOCH

Abstract

This paper reintroduces the theory of political alienation as a model for analysing and critiquing public sphere structures, arguing that commodified and professionalised media and organisational structures distance the general public from the production of public opinion and limit the public's capacity to use communication for democratic empowerment. These communication norms and practices act as a counter-force to more deliberative forms of communication and (re)create five conditions of alienation – commodification, social isolation, meaninglessness, normlessness, and powerlessness – that influence what individuals know, how they interact, and who ultimately has power in the political process. Integrating literature on public opinion, deliberative democracy, mediated communication, and collective action, this paper offers an anti-normative lens for critiquing currently existing practices and understanding how contemporary communication structures operate systemically.

Katherine R. Knobloch is PhD candidate in the Department of Communication, University of Washington; e-mail: krknobl@u.washington.edu.

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Introduction

Ideally, political communication is governed by the rules of communicative action (see Habermas 1984, 284-289) or deliberation (see Gastil 2008, also Burkhalter, Gastil, and Kelshaw 2002, 405). Public spheres, however, are often dominated by non-deliberative forms of communication. And though deliberation is often used as a framework for understanding and critiquing political communication, contemporary scholarship lacks a counter-framework for understanding what happens when communication in the public sphere routinely falls short of this ideal. So although much research explores how singular communication channels function or how the normative model of deliberation may be realised in practice, scholars have not provided a macro-level perspective that adequately describes structures that fail to live up to deliberative ideals and the effects these structures may have on individuals who interact within them.

In this paper, I reintroduce the concept of political alienation and apply it to the context of Western, democratic public spheres, exploring how commodified and professionalised communication structures can distance the public from the production of public opinion and subsequently distort the public's role in democratic governance. As a theory concerning the effects of structure on individual agency, alienation provides an apt lens for critiquing public sphere practices because it highlights the ways that non-deliberative structures hinder individuals' ability to use communication to govern themselves. Moreover, this model allows us to think about the potential effects that non-deliberative structures may have on individuals. Because structures limit the agency of actors who interact through them (Giddens 1984), communication channels that alienate individuals from the production of public opinion likely have cognitive ramifications, affecting the way that individuals think about their roles in governance.

The model of public sphere alienation presented here looks at both the structural conditions and cognitive effects of non-deliberative communication routines, providing an anti-normative theory for analysing and critiquing currently existing practices and their cognitive consequences. In this paper, I first review what a deliberative public sphere would look like in practice, then contrast that ideal with contemporary communication routines, using the model of public sphere alienation to look at both how non-deliberative communication structures operate and how they affect those who communicate through them.

Public Sphere Structures and Deliberation

A public sphere is "a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalised arena of discursive interaction" (Fraser 1992, 57). In other words, public spheres are communicative spaces through which private individuals discuss public affairs, formulate public opinion, and communicate these opinions to the state (Habermas 1989). And in large-scale democracies, this communication is facilitated, in part, through media outlets and organisations that allow mass, dispersed publics to communicate with one another. Interactions within these public sphere structures, then, affect the public's ability to use communication as a means for democratic control. Although communica-

tion structures do not act deterministically, as routinised ways of interacting they constrain the agency of actors who interact within them (Giddens 1984). So even though individuals may retain some agency when acting within communication structures, the norms and practices that make up these structures limit and prescribe the public's ability to interact with one another in the formation of public opinion. In short, differences in organisational and media structures can influence whose voices are represented and what opinions are expressed (Ginsberg 1986; Herbst 1993).

For media and organisational structures to empower citizens, they must allow individuals to effectively express their political opinions to decision-making officials. Ideally, public sphere structures enable this type of expression by acting as a forum for deliberation, or non-coercive and egalitarian political conversations in which individuals share information, discuss underlying values, and weigh the pros and cons of a broad range of solutions (Gastil 2008). Deliberation is essential to utilising public spheres for democratic control because it attempts to mitigate the alienating forces of hierarchical communication structures by (1) fostering "enlightened understanding" (see Dahl 1989, Fishkin 1991; also Chambers 2003) and (2) creating conditions of communicative equality (Benhabib 1996; Dahlberg 2005).

These two goals are intimately intertwined. For public sphere structures to "enlighten" us, they must enhance individuals' ability to make the choices they would have made if they had full information (Fishkin 1991). When people hold low levels of information or believe inaccurate information, their opinion preferences may differ from the opinions they would hold with better information (Fishkin 1991; 2009; Kuklinski et al. 2000). Knowledgeable citizens have more stable attitudes, can link their interests and attitudes, and tend to choose candidates who hold views consistent with their attitudes (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). In sum, enlightened understanding equates to the knowledge individuals must hold in order to effectively govern themselves. Facilitating enlightened understanding, then, requires public sphere structures to provide avenues through which individuals can acquire accurate and relevant information necessary to form opinions that are reflective of underlying preferences.

Media structures facilitate enlightened understanding by providing individuals with the information necessary to make political choices. Individuals likely rely on shortcuts provided by the media in forming their public opinions (Zaller 1992; Popkin 1994) and draw on media content in their interpersonal political discussions (Gamson 1992). Organisational structures can also lead to more enlightened public opinions by fostering communication among citizens. While those who take a mediated view of deliberation (Page 1996) may see citizen-to-citizen communication as largely trivial in comparison to the formation of public opinion that is directed by political elites, citizen-to-citizen deliberation that is rooted in access to information and attempts to adhere to the rules of communicative action (see Habermas 1984) does lead to more informed, cohesive, and stable political views (Fishkin 1995; Gastil and Dillard 2001; Eveland 2004). Rather than *replacing* citizen-to-citizen deliberation, mediated deliberation serves as a *tool* for citizen-to-citizen deliberation by providing information and opinion guidance (Mutz and Martin 2001; McLeod et al. 2001) and, ideally, enhances the development of enlightened understanding.

For public sphere structures to be deliberative they must not only enhance enlightened understanding; they must also provide equal opportunity to speak under fair and egalitarian conditions (Benhabib 1996; Dahlberg 2005; Gastil 2008). A large-scale deliberative public sphere again relies on the media and organisational structures to meet these needs. Organisations and mediated networks provide representation to dispersed members of the public by allowing private individuals to publicly connect with one another in the interest of achieving a common goal (Bimber, Flanagin and Stohl 2005), and sustained organisational involvement is crucial to maintaining influence over policy decisions (Hacker and Pierson 2010). For this type of representation to serve a democratic function, however, marginalised individuals must be able to use organisational and mediated networks to effectively express their opinions to people in positions of decision-making power. Routinised communication structures can either enable this type of associational representation or hinder it. Recent work in collective action theory illustrates this link, showing how emerging technologies that restructure how individuals organise and communicate can change the ways that individuals and collectives express opinions and use the media to influence decision-making (see Bennett 2003; 2005; Bimber 2003; Bimber, Flanagin, and Stohl 2005).

So, a deliberative public sphere empowers democratic citizens by increasing their enlightened understanding and creating opportunities for individuals and groups to effectively express their public opinions. Because this model is a normative ideal (as opposed to an existing practice), it serves as a guidepost by which to critique the current structures of the public sphere (Gastil 2008, xii), but it does not provide an adequate means for describing public sphere structures that fail to live up to this ideal. In many contemporary public spheres, top-down, commodified, isolating, and mystifying media and organisational structures crowd out more empowering avenues and limit their democratic potentials. In the next section, I focus specifically on structures of the public sphere that result in conditions of alienation, providing a model for critique that sits on the opposite end of the spectrum of the deliberative model widely used in the political communication literature.

Public Sphere Alienation

Mészáros (1970) articulates alienation as the commodification of human labour and the consequent isolation of the individual. Alienation is:

> *The universal extension of "saleability" (i.e. the transformation of everything into commodity); by this conversion of human beings into "things" so that they could appear as commodities on the market … and by the fragmentation of the social body into "isolated individuals"… who pursued their own limited, particularistic aims "in servitude to egoistic need," making a virtue out of their selfishness in their cult of privacy* (Mészáros 1970, 7).

Mészáros refers to a definition of alienation based on labour relations in industrialised societies that convert human beings into commodities, thereby isolating them from one another and stripping them of their collective power. Scholars of government have applied this concept to processes outside of labour relations, particularly for the purposes of this paper, to processes that distance citizens from their governing power (Rosenberg 1951; Seeman 1959; 1975; Finifter 1970).

Using the lens of alienation allows us to more clearly delineate which individuals perform which functions and discuss who ultimately has power in the production process. In the context of public spheres, communication norms and practices that distance individuals from the production of public opinion estrange citizens from their governing power and result in five conditions of political alienation – commodification, social isolation, meaninglessness, normlessness, and powerlessness (Seeman 1959) – that influence what individuals know, how they interact, and whose opinions are ultimately expressed. To explain this model and illustrate its applicability, I discuss each condition below, providing a description of each condition and using it to critique currently existing practices.

Though these conditions appear as distinct headings, this is only for ease of discussion. The five conditions are closely related, and communication norms that produce one condition often produce others. In addition, though I have separated out the effects of organisational and media structures, in many cases they work together to produce public sphere alienation, reinforcing one another by positioning the general public in similarly passive positions. Finally, although this paper focuses primarily on media and organisational routines, I also attempt to integrate research concerning the cognitive aspects of these conditions and suggest ways these may be a result of structural conditions.

Commodification

The primary impetus for public sphere alienation is commodification, which occurs when public opinion is produced for profit. For individuals acting within commodified structures, work is transformed into a saleable object and workers are separated from the products of their labour (Mészáros 1970, 7). Rather than performing work for the sake of the completion of a project, tasks are undertaken for some outside reason, namely financial rewards (Seeman 1959), and the product of that work becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold for profit. When commercialised and capitalistic interests dominate structures within the public sphere, public opinion becomes a saleable product constructed for the demands of the market, transforming public opinion from a tool for democratic empowerment into a means for profit.

In the context of organisations, commodification occurs when organisations shift their focus from representing the interests of wide-spread membership to maximising professional and economic efficiency. Lobbying and litigation often prove more efficient than mass, active participation at inciting effective policy change, costing organisations less time and money and producing more consistent and effective results than widespread public participation (Epp 1998; Skocpol 1999). Recognising this, individuals join advocacy organisations in order for lobbyists to represent their interests to political figures. "There is usually no other reason to join these groups – lobbying is what they do, and those who join understand that" (Berry 1999, 369).

Because of this, many organisations focus on a small staff of professionals funded by checkbook membership. Under these organisational structures, professionals are paid to create effective expressions of public opinion. This allows wealthy individuals the opportunity to outsource their democratic responsibilities to experts, rather than participate in the formation and expression of public opinion (Skocpol 1999),

and commodifies opinion by transferring the duty of producing opinion from the voluntary activist to the subsidised professional (Ginsberg 1986). Moreover, because this shift towards professionally produced public opinion requires financial donations rather than the participation of the general public, it may further marginalise disadvantaged groups (Hacker and Pierson 2010). Those in lower socio-economic groups are already less likely to be able to participate in the political process (Brady, Verba, and Schlozman 1995; Skopcol 1999). The dominance of commodified public opinion organisations likely increases their exclusion.

Similar to organisational commodification, mediated commodification occurs when monetary efficiency becomes the primary goal for news organisations. Because market forces tend to drive out public affairs content (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004), capitalistic media structures often lead to this condition. The opinions of those already in power generally receive significantly more media attention than those of the general public (Bennett 1990; Entman 2004), in part because of the efficiency of this form of reporting (Entman 1989). Governmental press offices often subsidise capitalistic news organisations by generating pre-constructed news, making reporting on government affairs a more efficient and economical enterprise because they essentially do the journalists work for free (Cook 1998). Similar trends emerge in the public relations industry. Because news is expensive to produce, journalists rely on public relations experts to provide pre-constructed stories that subsidise the costs of news gathering (McChesney 2004). This pushes citizens out of public sphere conversations because including them would be monetarily inefficient.

Modern punditry serves as a particularly concise example of mediated commodification, though the phenomenon is underexplored. Although pundits' ideally act as authoritative experts who can contribute specialised knowledge to the public debate (Nimmo and Combs 1992) and aid in enlightened understanding, punditry, like the news media more generally, has become a for-profit industry. This encourages pundits to produce profitable content rather than enlightened opinions and continues the trend of producing efficient, rather than enlightening, news content.

Because structural conditions of commodification replace the work of the citizen with the work of professionals, commodifying public sphere structures likely reduce citizens' confidence in their own political competency. In short, with the job of citizens being performed more efficiently and effectively by professionals, individuals may not feel they are capable of performing the task of citizenship, thus, commodifying structures likely reduce individuals' internal efficacy (see Niemi et al. 1991), preventing citizens from understanding themselves as either capable of self-governance or a vital part of the governing process.

Isolation

The second condition, isolation refers to an individuals' connection to her community. In the context of public spheres, conditions of isolation can prevent individuals from collectively engaging in the production of public opinion and isolate those individuals who do engage in this process. Professionally focused organisations reduce the opportunities for individuals to engage in political discussions and, thus, opportunities for individuals to collectively construct public

opinion. Even within groups, however, isolation may occur when organisational norms prevent heterogeneous discussion, therefore producing opinions constructed in isolation.

Coupled with commodified organisational structures that displace the general public, declines in active organisational membership lead to conditions of isolation. Robert Putnam (2000) has documented a decline in community-based organisations, illustrating a tendency toward greater isolation. Although scholars, citing changing organisational trends, have expressed scepticism at results showing decreases in community ties (Ladd 1999; Norris 2002), the dominance of highly professionalised and commodified organisations pushes individuals out of associational life and diminishes opportunities for diverse members of local communities to discuss public affairs. Moreover, contemporary interest groups that do include members of the public tend to focus on specific policies or events rather than entire communities (Berry 1999; Skocpol 1999; Wuthnow 2002; Bimber 2003) limiting the extent to which organisations can create sustainable communities. This diminishes the once strong bonds and enduring commitments that characterised earlier organisations (Wuthnow 2002) and depletes the opportunities for diverse individuals to discuss public affairs and formulate collective expressions of public opinion.

Networking technologies provide opportunities to circumvent these traditional structures, creating avenues for diverse groups of people to communicate with one another and circumvent the isolating effects of time, space, and scale (Bimber 2003; Coleman and Blumler 2009), but these new structures may foster new forms of isolation. Because networking and data mining technologies allow political organisers to quickly activate latent groups (Bimber et al. 2005; Howard 2006), organisations do not need to maintain regular group members, diminishing the need and opportunity for individuals to gather and create community bonds.

Conditions of isolation can also arise when individuals are gathered for discussion. Some groups, fearing conflict, avoid talking politics (Eliasoph 1996), essentially isolating themselves from discussions of political affairs and thus active expressions of public opinion. In addition, some individuals will remain silent when they perceive that their opinions differ from those of other group members (Noelle-Neumann 1974). This suggests that gathering individuals together is not enough to combat the effects of isolation. Even when citizens are not socially isolated, homogeneous discursive norms may prevent citizens from speaking up and alienate them from presumably collective expressions of public opinion.

Tendencies toward homogeneous talk are exacerbated in enclave-based mediated communication. Enclave discussion "occurs within more or less insulated groups, in which like-minded people speak mostly to one another" (Sunstein 2007, 77). As Sunstein argues, the proliferation of targeted media outlets provides individuals with a growing power to filter what they are exposed to, allowing individuals to self-select the information they hear and isolating them for outside information and opinion.

These structural forms of isolation likely have consequences for the way individuals think about one another. Declining participation in organisations limits the public's opportunity to build social trust with one another (Putnam 2000), limiting their willingness to engage in communication with outside groups and form a sense of collective identity. In addition, like-minded discussion proliferated through both

media and organisational structures catering exclusively to enclaves can increase extremism and group homogeneity, encouraging polarisation and harming the ability for heterogeneous groups to identify common interests (Sunstein 2007). In short, these structures likely result in cognitive isolation, limiting the public's ability to connect with one another and see each other as co-members of a community.

Meaninglessness

The third condition of public sphere alienation, meaningless, occurs when communication structures mystify the distinctions between or the consequences of choices. Public sphere structures can contribute to meaninglessness indirectly by fostering isolation or directly by distorting information. These structures dampen the public's ability to form enlightened understanding and, in doing so, hamper the opportunities for fair and egalitarian communicative engagement.

Because individuals become isolated from competing expressions of opinion when engaging exclusively in enclave deliberation (Sunstein 2007), commodified news structures that target enclaves foster meaninglessness. Aside from diminishing individuals' opportunities to learn from one another (as discussed through isolation), segmentation and targeting emphasise difference over similarity, highlighting the risk that out-groups present to in-groups and preventing the possibility for compromise (Gandy 2001). This decreases individuals' ability to form enlightened understanding by discouraging them from considering and learning about competing viewpoints.

Further, because these practices foster meaninglessness, targeted news content allows commentators and journalists to proliferate information that, if not wholly inaccurate, severally frustrates individuals' abilities to understand the real tradeoffs between choices (Kuklinski, et al. 1999; Sunstein 2007). This problem is exacerbated when individuals are not only uninformed, they are misinformed, holding factually inaccurate information (Kuklinski et al. 2000). Those who pay attention to more extremist, and enclave-based media outlets hold higher levels of misinformation (Hofstetter et al. 1999), suggesting that enclave-based communication practices can not only proliferate misinformation, they can prevent individuals from achieving enlightened understanding.

Normlessness

Structural and cognitive normlessness is often referred to as anomie (Dean 1961; Finifter 1970; Seeman 1959; 1975) and coincides with conditions of anarchy (Seeman 1975). In either real or perceived conditions of normlessness, individuals may feel that working within the system is futile and attempt to move outside of the system, either by circumventing it or by engaging in illegal activity, in order to accomplish desired goals. When the public sphere creates conditions of commodification, social isolation, and meaninglessness, citizens may begin to feel that communication no longer serves as a vehicle for democratic control. In short, they begin to distrust the role of public sphere structures in the democratic process.

Dating back to Habermas's (1989) conception of the public sphere, scholars have lamented the potential for its structures to hinder, rather than foster, enlightened understanding, collective action, and democratic empowerment. In other words, they have warned of the potential for public sphere normlessness. Under this

condition, although the trappings of democratic communication still survive, they are largely anarchistic enterprises in which professionals vie for personal gain. In contemporary public spheres, strategic communication, "the scientific engineering and targeting of messages that subordinate the ideals of deliberation and transparency to the achievement of narrow political goals" (Bennett and Manheim 2001, 282) threatens to seriously undermine the ability of media and organisational structures to serve as forums for effective democratic empowerment.

Polls serve as an example of this dynamic. Rather than using polls as a means for understanding the opinions of the general public, campaigns may utilise polls to more carefully craft strategic messages. These measures gauge responses to similar messages worded in different ways to determine which persuasive arguments about a pre-determined policy option will be most appealing to the public (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). These findings are then used to sell pre-constructed opinion to the public. Subsequent polling can then use these field tested messages to produce results that rest more on semantic differences than preferences, ultimately constructing public opinion that purposefully undermines the public's will. Campaigns producing public opinion through these means disregard the role of the public sphere in expressing opinions *from* private citizens *to* governmental officials, and the public opinions produced fail to advance democratic empowerment.

Public sphere structures that produce conditions of commodification and isolation tend to prevent individuals from engaging in political activities by either replacing citizens with professionals or preventing them from engaging with one another. In addition, because they likely produce cognitive conditions of alienation, such as low levels of faith or trust in themselves, politics, deliberation, and one another, alienating structures likely diminish people's engagement. The literature on the effects of political distrust attest to the cyclical problems associated with this type of cynicism. Several scholars have documented the lack of trust or confidence citizens hold for governing institutions and politicians (Bennett 1998; Levi 1998; Ladd 1999) the media (Bennett 1998; Cook and Gronke 2001), and other citizens (Levi 1998; Putnam 2000; Wuthnow 2002), as well as the connections between lack of trust and declines in civic participation (Putnam 2000). Although a democracy necessitates some level of distrust to keep governing officials in check, severe cynicism can be detrimental to society. Deep cynicism may result in anomie, as people doubt the validity of the institutions that structure society and the validity of democracy as a desirable political ideal (Levi 1998; Gastil 2000).

When individuals lose their faith in deliberation as a viable means for deciding on community issues, they are likely recognising the normlessness within the public sphere. When public sphere discussion is dominated by alienating structures, citizens may begin to lose faith that communication can serve any purpose other than strategic manipulation. In short, they begin to lose faith in the possibility of deliberation. Though this concept has not received much scholarly attention, the connection between alienating structures and faith in the deliberative process is worth exploring. When members of a community recognise that professionals working within public spheres routinely shut them out of the conversation, peddle opinions for profit, disseminate misinformation, and fragment community bonds they may begin to lose faith in the prospect of deliberative communication.

Powerlessness

The result of all these conditions is powerlessness. Political powerlessness occurs when individuals lose their ability to make governmental-decisions (Seaman 1959). In the context of public spheres, powerlessness refers to the condition in which the general public loses control over the production and distribution of public opinion. Susan Herbst's (1993) dichotomy of top-down and bottom-up expressions of opinion illustrates how public sphere structures can produce powerlessness. According to Herbst, citizens, rather than those already in power, generate bottom-up expressions of public opinion (e.g., letters to representatives and traditional forms of protest). The power to express and define public opinion in these cases flows up from the citizen.

Alienating structures, however, create a top-down dynamic of opinion that gives political professionals greater power over the generation of public opinion. These structures can be poorly designed to handle sporadic feedback from the public (Coleman and Blumler 2009) who subsequently play a largely passive role in the construction of public opinion through these channels. Again, polling most clearly demonstrates the top-down dynamic (Ginsberg 1986; Herbst 1993). Polling allows political professionals to construct public opinion, deciding which opinions to measure and who can express opinions and providing a limited range of opinions from which to choose (Herbst 1993; Lewis 2001). (Advances in deliberative polling techniques [see Fishkin 1991; 2009] do attempt to correct some of these problems, and these will be discussed in further detail in the conclusion.) Ginsberg (1986) calls this the "domestication" of public opinion, stressing citizens' inability to control its production.

In the context of organisations, powerlessness results in a shift, "from large-scale organisations to computers, opinion survey analyses, and electronic media campaigns directed by small staffs of public relations experts" (Ginsberg 1985, 149). Under this condition, civic associations transform form membership-based organisations to advocacy groups, heavily dependent on professionalised constructions of public opinion rather than the input of the public. Emerging data mining and targeting technologies complicate this condition by fostering avenues for highly managed forms of participation. Utilising these tools, campaigns combine data from multiple sources, including information about lifestyles, consumer choices, census records, and voter registrations, and results from polls and surveys, to design highly personalised and strategically targeted messages and mobilisation efforts (Gandy 2001). Campaigns deliver these personalised appeals through individualised communication channels, such as cell phones or social networking accounts, to individuals who are likely to be receptive to the strategically constructed message (Chadwick 2006; Montgomery 2008). These technologies enhance the efficiency of highly professionalised organisations that create opinions *for* the public rather than facilitate the communication of opinions *from* the public.

"Astroturf" organisations may be the most explicit example of how political professionals strategically craft collective action while simultaneously limiting the power of the public. "Astroturf" organisations refer to political associations founded by professional lobbyists that appear to represent members of the public but whose members are not in regular contact with one another and do not play an active role in the organisational structure (Bennett and Manheim 2001; Gandy 2001; Howard

2006). Members of these groups may not know they are being represented, and when they do voice their opinions, they often do so through carefully crafted mechanisms and messages controlled by the subsidising organisation (Howard 2006).

Top-down media structures produce similar results. Five corporations own the majority of traditional media sources (Bagdikian 2004) diminishing the potential for content produced outside of these structures to receive attention. Further, traditional news practices such as indexing – tying mediated debate to official debate (Bennett 1990) – additionally privilege those already in position of power. Although new forms of digital and networking technologies offer opportunities for circumnavigating powerful media outlets or challenging their gate keeping functions (Bennett 2003; Bimber 2003; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Norris 2000), internet traffic is still concentrated around corporate interests, and the bulk of user-generated content receives insignificant amounts of attention (Dahlberg 2004; Hindman 2009). As long as emerging channels of communication are dominated by the same market forces and top-down structures that pervade the more traditional arenas, technological advances cannot guarantee reductions in powerlessness (Dahlberg 2001; 2004).

Scholars often define cognitive feelings of powerlessness as low external efficacy (Niemi, Craig, and Mattei 1991; Morrell 2003). Citizens with low levels of external efficacy do not feel that they have a say in government decisions and think that their representatives do not care about their opinions (Niemi et al. 1991). In other words, cognitive powerlessness refers to an individual's awareness of her structural powerlessness; it is "an individual's feeling that he [sic] cannot affect the actions of government" (Finifter 1979, 390). When individuals get pushed out of the public sphere through top-down structures that provide little opportunity for them to provide meaningful or effective input in governmental decision-making, they likely begin to lose faith in the political system as a means of democratic government.

Moving Forward

By now it should be evident that these dimensions are not mutually exclusive. All of these conditions are interconnected, and conditions and structures of alienation are not easily disentangled. Organisational and media structures that produce one condition of alienation often foster other conditions, and cognitive conditions of alienation often reinforce existing structural designs. As this piece has shown, public sphere structures affect who expresses opinions and, ultimately, what opinions are expressed. Though we have progressed a great deal in our understanding of individual public sphere structures, more work needs to be done integrating our understanding of the effects of these separate structures and parcelling out the potential effects of alternative forms of political communication. The framework provided here provides a mean for performing such systemic analysis.

The hierarchies produced through alienating conditions can lead to commodification by turning public opinion into a commodity that is bought and sold for profit, isolation by discouraging collective action and fostering enclaves, meaninglessness by capitalising on isolation and distorting information, normlessness by eroding the public's ability to utilise the structures of the public sphere to effectively express their public opinions, and ultimately powerlessness by fostering top-down expressions of opinion. Researchers interested in understanding the effects of public sphere structures on democratic governance should continue to explore the role that alien-

ation plays in transforming public opinion from expressions of the general public to commodified expressions generated by a small group of political professionals. Below, I present a few ideas for utilising this model and suggest projects oriented towards uncovering how structures work individually and in conjunction to foster alienating conditions as well as the systemic effects of such structures.

Studying the Systemic Production of Public Opinion

Case studies may be a particularly productive way to study the effects of alienation on public opinion. Utilising this framework, researchers could look at how political actors produce issue-specific expressions of public opinion or organise specific movements to better understand how the configuration of communication structures alter the general public's role in public opinion production and decision making. These studies would focus on the connection between interpersonal and networked communications, media intake, and organisational membership, examining how issue campaigns and opinions are developed across communication structures and exploring how these structures work together to influence whose opinions are expressed and what opinions are produced. In addition, comparison of the formation of public opinion concerning similar issues in different public spheres may be a way to discern the effects that systemic derivations have on the production of public opinion. Such comparative studies would attempt to link people's interactions through different structural formations of the public sphere, such as online networks versus localised networks or different national public spheres.

Advancing Methodologies

Scholars also need to recognise their role in alienating the public from expressions of public opinion. Scholars should undertake work that coincides with a commitment to recognising the researcher's role in validating certain public sphere structures, and thus understandings of public opinion. Too often scholars undermine more collective and active forms of expression, using top-down methodology that gives the scholar, rather than the citizen, control over the expression of opinions. While the best polls do attempt to ground their measures of opinion by honing their instrument with more open-ended and bottom-up forums such as focus groups, scholars' almost exclusive use of polling in operationalising public opinion (Korzi 2000) promotes a conception of public opinion that diminishes the publics' role in its production.

Certainly, scholars should continue to explore how individual opinions are cognitively developed, but we must recognise our power as researchers and work toward building methodologies that examine how citizens construct opinions without the direct influence of researchers. Polls are valid and helpful, but as scholars actively define public opinion (Converse 1987; Korzi 2000), their overuse serves the purpose of delegitimizing other forms of expression. When scholarship repeatedly portrays citizens as apathetic and incompetent without a discussion of the structures that may lead to these types of alienation, political professionals can justify the exclusion of lay citizens from the political process. This delegitimizes the general public and undermines the role of citizens in democratic governance.

An established scholarship on deliberative structures has attempted to correct at least part of this problem by reinserting informed interpersonal discussion into

the process of opinion formation. This scholarship moves toward a more nuanced understanding of the public's civic capacity and the relationship between the individual and society in the formation of public opinion. Deliberative scholars have introduced and begun to study several methodologies, including the deliberative poll (Fishkin 1991; 1995; 2009), citizen juries (Crosby 1995), and institutionalised panels for citizen deliberation (Gastil 2000; Gastil et al. 2011; Knobloch et al. 2011), aimed at producing more representative and enlightened opinions, and overviews of this literature suggest that these mini-publics can be effective at affecting macro-politics and prevent the co-optation of public discourse (Goodin and Dryzek 2006). Similar methods attempt to use the Internet as an arena for deliberation (Muhlberger 2005; Fishkin 2009) and may lower the high costs of participating in these more taxing forms of opinion expression. Though this work must keep constant vigil on the ways that non-deliberative and deliberative structures collide and influence one another (see, for example Hendricks 2006; Cornwall 2008) it moves us forward in both defining public opinion and in recognising the capacity for citizens to become capable decision makers when given the proper resources, such as information and time, to devote to opinion formation.

In addition, scholars should undertake more community-oriented studies. Advances in collective action theory have pointed toward ways that new information and communication technologies have allowed citizens to circumnavigate top-down, commodified, and isolating channels of the public sphere and reclaim their role in the formation of public opinion (Bennett 2003; 2005; Bimber 2003; Bimber et al. 2005). Researchers should continue to study both geographically localised and transnationally networked communities to understand how members of the public form, discuss, and express public opinions in their own words and from the ground up. Scholarship that relies on qualitative methods, such as interviews, ethnographies, direct observation, and focus groups can allow us to understand public opinion as it emanates from the people, and combined with studies which rely on surveys, content analysis, and network analysis can show how network structures interact with one another and influence the role of the public in utilising public sphere structures for democratic control, particularly in comparison to more traditional means.

Together, these literatures indicate that changes in structures leads to changes in the public's democratic empowerment and point toward ways the public sphere may be transformed. Any attempt at reform, however, must take a sobering look at the realities of hierarchical and commodified contemporary public spheres. If we hope to reintroduce citizens into the process of democratic governance, we must be explicit about the forces that alienated them in the first place.

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