

Media Policies and (Ethnic) Minority Voices: Comparing National Approaches and Rationales

Donald R. Browne
University of Minnesota

N.B. : I present this as a WIPE – a term I have coined to signify “Work In Progress Eternally.” While I anticipate the development and presentation of research based on the schema I propose here, no single schema can capture the full range of activity and experience found in the electronic media practices of ethnic minority groups. However, I do see value in attempting to establish schema that will assist us in identifying links between structures and practices, so that our comparisons of ethnic minority group experiences in different settings and within different nation states may be more precise, and therefore more instructive.

When German philosopher Juergen Habermas introduced his concept of the “public sphere” in the late 1950s, his homeland was a very different place. It had made a remarkable recovery from World War II – so remarkable, in fact, that most Germans no longer were willing to take menial or dangerous jobs such as garbage collecting, toilet cleaning, or even (*mirabile dictu* in the land of Mercedes-Benz!) automobile assembly. As a result, “foreigners” from Yugoslavia, Spain, Italy, Morocco and other southerly locales were beginning to appear on the streets of the larger German cities. They were relatively few in number; in any case they were gastarbeitern (“guest workers”) and therefore temporary residents. Still, they were widely regarded by the majority population as “different:” Darker-skinned, -haired and -eyed, sometimes oddly dressed, loud of speech and flamboyant of gesture. They cooked and worshipped in strange ways. Few of them spoke German. But they were *invited* guests, and a few of the State (Land) radio stations then comprising the West German public radio service ARD – a monopoly radio service at the time -- began in the early 1960s to provide some of them with informational programs in their own languages, usually for 15 minutes or less per language each day.

There is no indication in Habermas’ early writings that his public sphere might have room for those new guests. It was at that time a realm in which political discussion and debate could/should take place among the citizenry. The passage of time and the massive changes within Germany itself –

nearly ten per cent of its population now is foreign-born – have led him to speak increasingly of a public sphere in which economic issues are nearly as prominent as political issues, and in which ethnic minorities do have a place. (See Attachment A below.) How much of a place is uncertain: In a 1995 seminar session at Stanford University, he appeared to indicate that he regarded citizenship as a requirement for participation in the sphere. (However, the term “citizenship” may have been an error in translation.)

Habermas’ writings about the public sphere have never been very specific concerning the ways in which participation in it might be facilitated. He makes general references to the mass media as relevant agents, but pays far more attention to face-to-face spoken communication as customary vehicle for dialogue among individuals and within/between groups. He also appears to regard the public sphere as functioning primarily at the national level, at least in terms of the sorts of topics and concerns that might be discussed or debated within its confines.

Whether Habermas would accept my present use of his concept of the public sphere as a place where ethnic minorities and the “majority” culture might acknowledge, understand and value their similarities and differences, I do not know. Certainly he has stimulated me to think about the ways in which such a sphere might be created. I begin with the identification of where, how and in what forms certain nations already have begun to do so, whether intentionally or not. That in turn has led me to develop a schema which provides a more precise indication of the component parts of an electronic public sphere.

My comparative analysis of relevant policies and institutions, as well as practices, has been an ongoing project since 1987, and has its roots in some of my earlier research in local broadcasting in Europe. It has taken me to more than 20 nations¹ and to well over 100 electronic media services (including support structures such as advisory or financial bodies) and regulatory agencies. The services themselves have ranged in size and scope from local ethnic groups with as little as one hour of radio programming per week to national services with radio programs in as many as 70 different languages (Australia’s Special Broadcasting Service).

In my application of the Habermasian concept of the public sphere to the realities faced by ethnic minorities working through the electronic media, I have separated *policy* and *institutional form* so as to make their component parts clearer. They are of course intertwined, but not always in ways that one might have predicted, or even that the policymakers may have intended or that the institutions themselves may have anticipated. My definition of “policy” admittedly is quite liberal, including as it does not only presidential decrees, major court decisions, laws passed by legislative bodies, etc., but also the actions of government- or license fee supported broadcasters, as well as commercial operations, in developing specific program services for ethnic minorities, codes of practice mentioning their on-air depiction, etc. I have defined *practices* as including both *structural* and *programming* components.

My research is guided by four basic questions:

- 1) How do the electronic media serve as part of the public sphere where ethnic minority participation is concerned?
- 2) What sorts of policies have governments developed to assist ethnic minority participation in the public sphere, and how have those policies shaped the nature of ethnic minority participation?
- 3) What types of program-making activity have characterized ethnic minority participation?
- 4) How “public” is ethnic minority media participation in the public sphere? Who participates in it, who doesn’t, and why or why not?

My aim in searching for answers to those questions is to discern more clearly what sorts of effects the structural elements of policy and institutional form appear to have on participation and on program type and content. The answers should help ethnic minority groups to identify the sorts of media policies (including those yet to be formulated or enacted) and institutional forms are likely to be most helpful in meeting the goals they set for themselves as they prepare to participate in the public sphere, or as they consider altering their present practices.

I begin by considering several aspects attending the application of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere to the role that might be played within the sphere by the electronic media. I then continue by presenting a set of factors that affect the nature of participation by ethnic minorities in the public sphere. Finally, because Habermas places so much emphasis on the public sphere as a locus for civic (and perhaps civil) dialogue, I close with a consideration of what I see as some fundamental aspects of the *electronic* public sphere as a place for “majority”/“minority”

dialogue.

Are There Criteria for Admission to Habermas' "Public Sphere?"

1. Being a citizen of the country? "Second, immigrants should be obliged to assent to the principles of the constitution as interpreted within the scope of the political culture: that is, the ethical-political self-understanding of the citizenry of the receiving country. Once they become citizens themselves, they in turn get a voice in public debates, which may then shift the established interpretation of the constitutional principles. The obligation to accept the political culture may not, however, extend to assimilation to the way of life of the majority culture. A legally required political socialization may not have an impact on other aspects of the collective identity of the immigrants' culture of origin." (From an edited version of remarks delivered by Habermas in a seminar at Stanford University, January 25, 1995, recorded in Stanford Law Review, Vol. 47, pp. 849-853, May, 1995. This passage occurs on p. 853.)

2. Being male? Habermas uses the masculine singular and the collective plural, but seems not to use the feminine singular. However, nothing in what I have read of his work indicates that women are not equally admissible.

3. Communicating in a reasoned and reasonable manner? In many of his works, Habermas speaks of the need for "reasonableness" when people communicate within the public sphere. While this does not rule out the use of emotional appeals, he places considerable emphasis on the need for a certain degree of civility in discourse.

What Forms and Sorts of Discourse Are to Take Place in Habermas' Public Sphere?

1. Dialogue: Speech only, since the spoken word appears to be Habermas' favored choice? What about music, with & without lyrics? For example, there's a rich tradition of political songs in 20th c. Germany. And what about oral *and* visual satire, which again has been prominent in Germany?

2. Rationality? (As in 'Enlightenment rationality,' involving objectivity and universality.) Civility? And if so, must "receiving country" standards be the sole standards for judging whether discourse is rational or civil?

3. Couched as *critical* discourse, with an *emancipatory* purpose?

4. At the *national* level only? Given the fact that most émigré communities tend to locate themselves/be located in larger urban areas, and given the fact that the electronic media themselves tend to be more readily accessible at the local level than they are at the national level, the local level might be considered the logical starting point for both émigrés and "original"

citizens to engage in dialogue through the electronic media.

5. Political, Economic and Legal Issues Only? No “everyday,” get-acquainted” discourse, including speech *and* music, that might facilitate the development of mutual recognition of each other’s right to participate in the political, legal *and* cultural life of the nation/region/community?

FACTORS AFFECTING NATURE OF PARTICIPATION by ETHNIC MINORITIES IN THE ELECTRONIC PUBLIC SPHERE

Policy: Are there State-licensed electronic media outlets specifically for minorities?

Are there preference policies that assist minorities in acquiring or sharing licensed outlets?

Are there laws/statutes mandating balanced portrayals, “reasonable” amounts of airtime, etc., for ethnic minorities? What recourse do minorities have if they feel that their rights have been violated?

Do electronic media operations (networks, individual stations, professional groups such as NAB or RTNDA) have codes of practices that address issues of portrayal, amounts of airtime, etc.?

Are there government-supported organizations that help to encourage more balanced, more frequent portrayal of minorities by “majority” media? To assist minorities in portraying themselves?

In each of those cases, how *effective* does the policy appear to be in promoting participation in the public sphere by minorities?

Types of Outlets: Licensed outlets: Terrestrial radio? Terrestrial TV? Cable Radio? Cable TV?

Unlicensed outlets: Internet? Audio- and Videocassette?

How *accessible* are the outlets for minority audiences? For “majority” audiences?

Levels of Service: National? Regional (e.g. State or Province)? Local?

Financing: What forms (Annual government appropriation? Annual license fee? Advertising? Corporate /Individual donation? Media operation sale of services/merchandise/ programs?

How *stable* are those forms? How *adequate* are they for each minority operation’s (self-) perceived needs?

How do the various forms affect each operation’s *programming* policies? (What sorts of

influence might be expected in connection with each form?)

OPERATIONAL GOALS: What does each operation regard as its chief *raison(s) d'être*? How do those top priorities affect minority participation in the public sphere?

Are those priorities likely to be attractive to *other* minority groups? To the “majority?”

Some of the more common (as expressed by media operation staff) goals:

1. Maintaining links with the “home country”
2. Preserving, restoring or advancing the use of a minority language
3. Providing/restoring a sense of pride in minority accomplishments (cultural, social, political)
4. Combating negative stereotypes, esp. those provided by “majority” media
5. Indicating how minorities and “majorities” can/do work together
6. Serving as source of information on employment, health care, education, financial aid, etc.
7. Serving as place of employment (paid or voluntary, it's often regarded by those who undertake it as a worthwhile activity and a good self-confidence builder)

Media operation-Minority community Links: Does the operation have a community board? If so, how *representative* is it of the community? Is it strictly *advisory*, or does it have some real power?

Does the “larger” minority community (beyond the board) *participate* in selecting goals and priorities? Working within the operation itself? Does the operation itself facilitate participation, or does most of the initiative to participate come from outside?

Does the operation conduct audience research? Does it share results with the larger community?

PRIMARY AUDIENCES: Own minority group? Other minority groups? “Majority?”
Children? Adolescents? Younger adults? Older adults? Women? Men? Rural?
Urban?

Who is favored (amounts of airtime, times of day, days of week)? Who is disfavored or excluded? Are newly-significant minority groups (recent arrivals such as Somali in Minnesota) accommodated?

Who initiates the contact – the media operation or the group?

PROGRAMMING: Information: News, commentary, feature interviews, call-in shows; roundtable discussions; coverage of meetings; documentaries

Education: Teaching the language; teaching cultural and political history; teaching teachers how to teach minorities; linking with schools to provide production experience for students

Entertainment: Music (contemporary; “traditional;” popular; classical; minority; “mainstream;” local performers; national/international recording artists); Dance; Sports; Comedies and Dramas (rare)

To what extent is programming *representational* (“displaying” others)? To what extent is it *participatory* (others speaking for themselves)? (See Attachment B below for some examples of participatory programs.)

SOME FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS: ABOUT ETHNIC MINORITY PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECTRONIC PUBLIC SPHERE

Is there only one public sphere, or are there several? And if the latter, what does that do to Habermas’ construct? Is it even possible to speak of a single public sphere in an industrialized world where media outlets are multiplying so rapidly, with the possible exception of those moments, e.g. “9/11” when a single event may galvanize “the public” in the broadest possible sense?

Assuming that there *is* a public sphere – or at least one public sphere that is broader than any other public sphere – what is the role of the electronic media in facilitating *dialogue* between “majority” and “minority” populations within it? With *whom* is the dialogue being held within those populations? For what purpose(s)? Cultural? Political? Economic? How do “majority” and “minority” programs (productions) serve to facilitate it?

Attachment A

Some Habermas Observations With Implications for Participation in the Public Sphere by Ethnic Minorities

Habermas clearly recognizes the importance of the participation of ethnic minority groups in the public sphere, as witness the following passages – the first three from Remarks on Discourse Ethics, the fourth from “Habermas’ New Out of Two” (Hoenisch).

“There must be a common basis on which mutual understanding of alien cultures, belief systems, paradigms, and life forms is possible – that is, a translation *between* different evaluative

languages and not merely communication among members of *the same* language group relying on reciprocal observation of alien cultures. The languages and vocabularies in which we interpret our needs and communicate our feelings must be mutually permeable..." in Ch. 2, Remarks on Discourse Ethics, Justification and Application, Cambridge, MA and London, UK: The MIT Press, 1993, p. 95. (Translation by Ciaran Cronin) Originally published as one of a set of three essays in Erläuterungen zur Diskursethik, Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991, Ch. 6. In the Preface to the book, Habermas notes that "The "Remarks on Discourse Ethics" constitute the main text and derive from notes made during the years 1987 to 1990. They represent a confrontation with competing theoretical programs and are offered as a global critical evaluation of the relevant literature." (p.vii)

"... the *real* citizens of contemporary liberal societies are flesh and blood individuals who have grown up in different traditions and forms of life and owe their self-understanding to competing world views. The political public sphere in which they come together to form a public body of citizens is characterized by a plurality of belief systems and interest structures and the coexistence and confrontation of life forms and individual life projects..." same source, p. 93; here, Habermas is summarizing and interpreting John Rawls – mostly his (unpublished ms.?) "Justice and Fairness – A Briefer Restatement," 1989.

" [discourse ethics] adopts the intersubjective approach of pragmatism and conceives of practical discourse as a *public* practice of *shared*, reciprocal perspective taking: each individual finds himself compelled to adopt the perspective of everyone else in order to test whether a proposed regulation is also acceptable from the perspective of every other person's understanding of himself and the world.... It is only when the continued existence of this communication community, which demands of all its members an act of selfless empathy through ideal role taking, is assured that the networks of reciprocal recognition, without which the identity of each individual would necessarily disintegrate, can reproduce themselves." Same text, different chapter: Ch. 5, *Morality, Society, and Ethics: An Interview with Torben Hviid Nielsen*, p. 154. It is much more a discussion than it is an interview, and Nielsen begins by stating "The main topic of discussion will be your views on moral theory and ethics..." (p. 154)

"The possibility of mutual understanding becomes the horizon for different voices to exist alongside each other, joined in accepted validity even if they feel they are not communicating." Nikola Hoenisch, "From A Linguistic Tradition," in "Habermas' New Out of the Two"

Attachment B

Some Habermasian Uses of the Electronic Public Sphere by Minority Groups and Individuals

1. An Iranian woman with a weekly radio program over a Stockholm community radio station (Radio Sydvest) about Iranian women living in Sweden. She often discusses the plight of women in abusive relationships, and she has received numerous threats over the time (c. six years as of 2002) she has produced the program. However, the "public sphere" in this case is limited to listeners who speak Farsi.

2. A group of Aboriginal teenagers in Broome, Western Australia who approached the local Aboriginal radio station in 1995 with a proposal to make a series of radio plays about the sorts of problems that Aboriginal teenagers face: teenage sex; abusive parents (particularly alcoholic fathers); white prejudice. The plays stirred up considerable discussion in the Broome community, and not just the Aboriginal community, since the plays were in English.

3. A Cree Native American women's group in Northern Quebec who produced (mid 1990s) a set of video documentaries about unemployment and its effects on home life in their community. Since this was not the sort of issue that had been discussed in public (shame, fear of retaliation), that was a very bold move, and brought the community to discuss it and then take steps to decrease the levels of violence, drinking and gambling that had been going on. The effort probably would have been confined to the community, but news of it spread, and other communities used it as a model.

4. A rock band composed of Serbian and German musicians introduced a number of songs with lyrics that celebrated the virtues of joining two different cultural perspectives and coming up with a third culture. But they also mentioned the criticism they received from members of their own respective cultures for having "abandoned" their own cultural heritage. They also answered this criticism in song, noting that they all felt that they had *three* cultures to draw upon, and were all the richer for it! Originally produced in 1995 for an episode of the ZDF (Second German Television) series *Nachbarn* ("Neighbors"), their work was distributed on video, and probably used by many of Germany's Open Channels ("Offene Kanäle") – akin to U.S., U.K., etc. access channels, in that they're available through cable TV.

5. A group of German-Australian teenagers in Melbourne who produced a monthly program in German and English (mostly the latter), aimed at their peer group. The program formed part of a "German Hour" on a Melbourne community radio station (3ZZZ), and was the first youth-oriented segment to find a place on the "German Hour." When it came on air in 1999, some of the older German-Australian listeners objected strongly, because "the kids" played "distasteful" music – particularly music that contained "four letter words" (often six or more letters, in German). "The kids" defended their choice, explaining to the audience that they had developed the program to appeal primarily to their peers, but had hoped that older listeners could use it to gain insight on the sorts of things that interest their sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, etc.

The amounts of discussion/dialogue that were generated through such offerings almost certainly would have varied a great deal. Some were intended for narrowly-defined communities, while others had broader targets. However, in each case it was the intent of the individuals or groups to generate discussion, and there was a certain amount of risk involved – certainly for the originators, but perhaps on occasion for the listeners who entered into the discussion/dialogue.

¹ In Europe, the United Kingdom (England, Wales, Scotland, Cornwall); Ireland; France; Belgium; the Netherlands; West, East and united Germany; Poland; the former Yugoslavia; Switzerland; Italy; Denmark; Finland; Norway; Sweden; and Austria. In North America, the

United States and Canada (Quebec and Ontario). In Asia and the South Pacific, Japan, Australia (all states and the Capital Territory) and New Zealand.