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Title:

Habermas, Mouffe and Political Communication: A Case for Theoretical Eclectism

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Abstract:

While much research on communication and democracy continues to lean on Jürgen Habermas' work, many aspects of his approach have been intensely criticized in recent debates, both in communication studies and political theory. Habermas' emphasis on rational consensus as the aim of public communication has particularly been problematized. One of the most prominent critics, Chantal Mouffe and her agonistic model of democracy, has increasingly drawn the interest of media scholars. Mouffe explicitly contrasts the dominant Habermasian concept of the public sphere. It appears that her model is impossible to combine with the Habermasian approach. But how substantial are the differences? What are the disagreements centred on? And what are the consequences for empirical media and communication research? We argue in this paper that rather than accepting the "standard readings" or polar positions accredited to the two, we need to retain a certain "theoretical eclectism" in combining normative theories with empirical research. Despite their controversies, we argue that both can serve as critical perspectives that point to deficiencies and offer alternative democratic imaginaries.