

In short, this book adds strong voices and new analyses to the discourse on public opinion, media, and democracy. While I wish the thematic organization had been tweaked to elicit more links between the theoretical and empirical chapters, researchers, teachers, and students will find plenty of compelling (and controversial) arguments and data within Splichal's text.

Shaping Abortion Discourse: Democracy and the Public Sphere in Germany and the United States, by Myra Marx Ferree, William Anthony Gamson, Jürgen Gerhards, and Deiter Rucht. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 370 pp. \$23.99 paper.

Reviewed by BARBARA PFETSCH and SILKE ADAM

Shaping Abortion Discourse offers a convincing counterperspective on the idea of a unifying force of globalization or Americanization. The analysis of the discourse on abortion in the United States and Germany from the 1960s to the mid-1990s reveals essential differences in the nature of the public debate in the two countries. The authors show that it is highly rewarding to study public spheres by comparing debates in the realm of the nation state, as the typical patterns in the public discourses have been persistent over more than 30 years. To understand the mind-boggling differences, the authors point to the variation of the two countries under study in their political settings, on a sociocultural dimension, and within the mass media system. As they developed categories that allow one to describe the "ideas and meaning-making institutions in a particular society" (p. 62), they offer a useful tool to understand not only the particular nature of the abortion debate in Germany and the United States, but also the general components of public debates that may apply to various modern societies. One of the true values of the study therefore lies in the provision of a convincing analytical tool for the investigation and evaluation of the nature of public discourses beyond the single cases under investigation.

The theoretical and empirical theme of the study is the idea of a media induced public sphere which consists of an arena, where actors publicly speak, of a gallery, where the audiences observe this arena, and of the backstage, where actors work on their ideas and strategies. The strength of this theoretical framework concerns the focus on the mass media as the central arena of the various public spheres. Journalists therefore become crucial actors. They "play a double role both as purveyors of meaning in their own right and as gatekeepers who grant access or withhold it from other speakers" (p. 12). To analyze these media-induced public spheres, the authors use a multimethod approach: A longitudinal quantitative content analysis of four quality newspapers and a document analysis are combined with survey data and in-depth interviews with collective actors and journalists.

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Discourse—as the authors see it—is conceptualized as a twofold desiderate. On the one hand, it reveals the power structures of the contest over meaning in a specific society. On the other hand, it can be regarded as a central component of the democratic process, since all democratic theories agree on the value of subjecting political decisions to public debate. The combination of the empirical question regarding the power structures in the public sphere with the normative questions that are raised by democratic theories is of central importance to get a grasp of the value of this book. Discourse as a contest over meaning may influence the chances of pursuing policy interests. Parts II and III therefore deal with the success of various actors in the public sphere to get their own voice into the media and frame the discourse accordingly. Discourse that is confronted with normative criteria shows the closeness or distance of a society toward different democratic ideals. This is the central theme of Part IV. Here the authors examine how the two countries fit the normative criteria regarding the actors involved in and the content, form, and outcome of the discourse. By combining these two aspects, the authors go way beyond the classical normative thinking on the public sphere and the purely empirical media analysis.

The book shows convincingly the advantages of a comparative approach in the analysis of media induced public spheres. Research that focuses only on the debate in one country creates major problems in interpreting the empirical results. For instance, the authors find that the German debate on abortion is dominated by actors that represent the political parties and the institutionalized political process. These actors make up 70% of all German actors. Only by contrasting this figure with the 40% share of these actors in the U.S., can one conclude that the public sphere in the U.S. is more open to or inclusive of civil society actors and their arguments.

The authors counterbalance in a delightful way the wholesale condemnation of the media and their ascribed insufficient role in democracies. As they systematically examine the normative claims of the representative liberal, the participatory liberal, and the discursive and constructionist theories of democracies toward the public sphere, it becomes clear that there is no single standard against which the public sphere can be evaluated. Only by measuring the degree to which the normative criteria are fulfilled in various debates and countries can one assess the media's performance as actors and arenas of the public sphere. For the abortion debate, the authors show that the discourse in Germany resembles more the ideas of the representative liberal model, whereas the debate in the United States comes closer to the participatory model of democracy. Thus, media critics and intellectuals who are reasoning about the media's role in democracy can draw on empirical tests of normative standards which point to the strengths and weaknesses of media induced public spheres in modern societies.

However, the study quite naturally also brings up the limits of such an analysis. For instance, the authors look at quality media within the print sector. Therefore, the findings—as the researchers conclude themselves—cannot be regarded as representative of the overall media system of the countries under study. It is highly probable that other characteristics of the public discourse would turn out to be crucial if a broader spectrum of media (including television) were taken into account. In order to come up with hypotheses on the discourse in a country as a whole, one needs to further develop ideas about the discursive opportunity structures. The political and sociocultural components have been very well considered. What is still missing is a more systematic approach that allows for hypotheses on how a media system as a whole affects public discourses. If one came to grips with such a framework, it would be easier to judge the degree to which the abortion debate is typical of the public discourse as such. This argument

applies in a twofold manner. First, differences in media systems are grown historically. They can be regarded as an ongoing construction of culture that is reflected in the different formats that media systems offer. Formats refer to *how* something is communicated, not to *what* is communicated (Altheide & Snow 1988, p. 195). This idea gives primacy to form over content, as formats shape and limit content within their own parameters. By systematically examining which formats a media system supports, one could evaluate how open a media system as a whole is to political discussions such as the abortion debate and how much complexity it can transfer within the debate. Second, it remains open for further empirical research how strongly the nature of the discourse is determined by the choice of the topic. The authors themselves conclude that there may be other topics less historically bound to U.S. civil society and German party politics which may show other characteristics of the discourse (p. 296).

Shaping Abortion Discourse is a clear-headed plea against the often-referred-to unifying power of globalization. It vividly demonstrates how different sociocultural, political, and media settings shape debates in different countries. It counterbalances the wholesale condemnation of media. Whether media fulfill their role for a functioning democracy strongly depends on the normative criteria one uses as standards for evaluation. *Shaping Abortion Discourse* is a fascinating study and a great intellectual inspiration for students who are looking into the role of the media in democracy. It goes well beyond a simple analysis of the discourse on abortion and allows us to understand cultural and political elements in the makeup of the public sphere.

Reference

- Altheide, D. L., & Snow, R. P. (1988). Toward a theory of mediation. In J. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication yearbook* (pp. 194–223). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.