The Rhetorical Marketplace: Interpreting the Rhetoric of Marketers and Consumers as Civil Public Discourse

Casey Joseph Slott

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THE RHETORICAL MARKETPLACE: INTERPRETING THE RHETORIC OF MARKETERS AND CONSUMERS AS CIVIL PUBLIC DISCOURSE

A Dissertation

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Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for The degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

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May 2010
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MARKETERS AND CONSUMERS AS CIVIL PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

THE RHETORICAL MARKETPLACE: INTERPRETING THE RHETORIC OF MARKETERS AND CONSUMERS AS CIVIL PUBLIC DISCOURSE

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May 2010

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Calvin Troup

The claim that we live in a time of uncivil public discourse is well-documented. Because public discourse is significantly influenced by commercial forms of conversation, many believe that marketing communication shares responsibility for the way public discourse shapes civil society. Jurgen Habermas, for example, has argued that marketers have transformed the public sphere into a space of passive consumption rather than the critical participation of ordinary people. Habermas’ theory of “communicative action” provides an intriguing, yet incommensurable theoretical approach to address both concerns regarding the marketer’s strategic teleology and the call for alternative communication processes to guide marketer to consumer discourse. Gerard Hauser's conceptual model of the actual discursive practices of ordinary people, on the other hand, bridges gaps in the work of Habermas and demonstrates how a rhetorical interpretation of
the marketplace enables marketers to better understand the meaning of dialogue and relationship-building with consumers as a civil, ethical discourse. Marketing communication, then, does not denigrate the quality of public discourse when dialogue and relationship-building is conceived as part of a discursive process that coheres with the rhetorical features of civil society.
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Chapter 1: Public Discourse and Civil Society

What is Public Discourse?

Discourse represents the opportunity for human communication, the *telos* of which, Jurgen Habermas tells us, is “mutual understanding” (*Communicative v. 2*, 120-121). The nature of discourse suggests the potentiality to produce both society and the self, for the “terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people” (Gergen 15). Discourse aims to shape understanding from the “active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship” (Ibid). And so, discourse often reflects a political disposition, i.e., people negotiating conflict and disruption, for, as Habermas points out, discourse functions as “an organizing principle of democratic judgment and legitimacy” (Warren 171). Human beings cannot avoid being agents of discourse, and when we make discourse a focal point of our scholarly investigations, we arguably are led to recognize that discourse has a distinctive public and moral character.

Discourse can be called public when human beings seek a secured space to participate in public life (Rodin and Steinberg 16). As people actively engage each others’ ideas, beliefs and claims in a public space, they nurture the ongoing rhetoric that constructs society. Discourse is moral because its public practice presupposes that rhetors are capable of recognizing notions of virtue and acting on them (Farrell, *Norms* 57). The assumption that humanity requires good public discourse, then, might be a philosophical motivation for critical inquiry. In his book, *The Private Death of Public Discourse*, Barry Sanders posits public discourse as the proper rhetorical indicator of our capacity to engage in social and political relations, for, “in a time as fragile as ours, we connect with
each other through the slimmest, the most evanescent, elements-words. Every sentence is a lifeline” (7).

Accordingly, a study of public discourse evokes a practical concern as well, for the quality of our discourse frames the quality of our relationships including those grounded in interpersonal, social, political, as well as economic contexts. It follows, that in its everyday use, public discourse encompasses “our political, religious, informational and commercial forms of conversation” (Postman 28). The power of public discourse lies in the capacity to bring our social, political and economic reality into being by talking about it, or, as Sanders shows, shaping the world by “talking about and in it, in stories that we string together with others in a community of meaning” (185). It can be said, then, that an examination of discursive practices provides “the evidentiary base for studying and interpreting the constitution of social will” (Hauser, Vernacular 13). Public discourse also signifies the potential power of rhetoric, a power actualized when “people act together” (Ibid).

Hannah Arendt captures the *dynamis* of public discourse metaphorically as the “space of appearance,” i.e., the space where “I appear to others as others appear to me” (198). The space of appearance aptly points to the social and political reality that human beings cocreate through the discursive power of “speech and action,” since to be deprived of it “means to be deprived of reality” (199). Public discourse is a testament to the meaning-making capacity of people. It presents itself as “a web, a complicated, variegated net of language that can capture the shadow truth- the ambiguous nature- of a problem in stark contrast to the way that numbers and statistics bypass and cancel the flesh and bone of experience” (Sanders 7). Public discourse, then, reflects the capacity for
people to actively engage one another, creating a social, political, interpersonal, and commercial web of conversation and dialogue whose character is distinctly rhetorical.

**Incivility and Public Discourse**

One of the primary concerns of this dissertation is the issue of uncivil public discourse, i.e., is contemporary life marked by a significant decline in our public discourse? This is no simple yes or no question. Each position is well-documented in the literature. Sanders, for example, warns that “a lack of conversation” has contributed to widespread belief that public discourse is in a state of decline:

> Millions of Americans dial up talk radio, or turn on Oprah and Geraldo, or latch onto some piece of propaganda. They boot up or go on-line. They hook into the Web or a chat room. What they do not do, however, is talk very much. The words that users scroll onto the PC monitor pass for speech. (9)

Like many scholars, Sanders suspects that technology is an adverse agent of change. However, is technology to blame for an apparent inability to construct intelligent discourse? No doubt, technology is often the first scapegoat when searching for evidence of dissipated public discourse. Over twenty years ago, Postman, for example, argued that as television became the center of our culture, the “seriousness, clarity and, above all, value of public discourse” severely declined (29). McAllister depicts digital telecommunications technology as “tyrannical,” in part, because it discourages the kind of thoughtful deliberation necessary for robust public discourse (243-245). And Stephen Carter warns of the intrusiveness of cell phones as the space for civil conversation grows increasingly difficult to find with people “carrying on loud conversations on cellular
phones” in trains, on street corners and restaurants (191). Technology underscores the casual observation that public discourse has been degraded, but it cannot completely bear the burden of this claim, for as Carter reminds us, “science is no enemy of civility,” and most Americans will welcome technological change, particularly when the marketing rhetoric promises to improve people’s lives (186). In the technical sense, technology changes the way human beings communicate with one another. However, it is the implication of this change, derived from the way in which people use technology, that invites scrutiny on the connection between public discourse and civility. No doubt, there is a connection, and it often shows up in scholarly discussions integrating good public discourse with citizenship and civil society. Civility, citizenship, and civil society, then, form a conceptual starting point from which to investigate the claim that public discourse is in decline.

Harwood, for example, argues that public discourse today thrives in an environment of “civic dissonance,” a kind of social and civil discord, “constant and overwhelming,” bearing no “natural rhythm to it other than the unnerving civic noise we hear and the crippling effect it has on public life” (296). Civic dissonance is argued to threaten the ability for everyday people to establish the necessary esprit de corps for civic engagement and participation, therefore, reinforcing a presumed sense of social disunity. Scholarly discussions of public discourse in American society frequently seek to re-cultivate the notion of civility as grounds for democratic praxis. Some scholarship, then, on postmodernism and deliberative theories of democracy, for example, shows that public life in America is suffering from a “rising tide” of incivility (Ryfe 163). Often this position is predicated upon one of two beliefs. First, language and discourses have
created social and political inequalities, and second, the best hope for reviving healthy civic discourse is through some form of deliberative politics (Ibid). Though both of these claims contribute to an examination on the conditions of civil public discourse, any perceived rise of incivility must ultimately be judged by the capacity for ordinary citizens to participate in the public discussion and debate of consequential issues. This is not to say that more citizens need to participate to roll-back the “tide of uncivility,” but rather participation is understood as a process by which a group of people become an active public. If incivility means that social and political inequalities exist, then, participation would suggest that the opinions of ordinary people matter enough to contribute to the issues, direction and character that constitute public discourse. Also, while deliberative democracy is an important approach to encouraging participation, it represents one of many perspectives that frame the capacity for people to shape public discourse.

The claim, then, that society is mired in uncivil public discourse is worth examining, yet its connection to citizen apathy demands qualification since many scholars contest the idea that public discourse has been decimated. On the one hand, some social critics will blame public cynicism on a perceived sense of “corruption, mismanagement, and patent breach of faith by public leaders…so commonplace that they cease to outrage citizens” (Rizvi 91). Consequently, even the most fundamental democratic processes, such as voting, are challenged by a lack of public confidence (Ibid). Does this mean that our political culture is uniquely uncivil today? Munger, for example, argues that negative public discourse in the political arena, e.g., negative advertising, leads to the demoralization of voters which increases cynicism, breaks down trust and communication and decreases “participation in voting and other expressive
forms of activity” (16). Similarly, Cortes Jr. argues that because of a diluted political process, with its emphasis on electronic town meetings, mass mailings, thirty-second television ads and carefully orchestrated debates between the candidates, people are no longer encouraged to be “active participators” in our democratic processes (49-50). And taking Habermas’ lead, Eberly blames the erosion of public life on the “oligarchic control by a handful of corporations of what used to be the public airwaves and a political system in which dollars are allowed to stand in as equivalent for speech” (46). Additionally, in her book, *Rights Talk the Impoverishment of Political Discourse*, Glendon attributes the dissipation of public discourse to a political culture whose unreflective preoccupation with individual rights impedes our capacity to engage in productive public discourse:

> The strident rights rhetoric that currently dominates American political discourse poorly serves the strong tradition of protection for individual freedom for which the United States is justly renowned. Our stark, simple rights dialect puts a damper on the process of public justification, communication, and deliberation upon which the continuing vitality of a democratic regime depends. (171)

Realistically, however, neither negative political discourse, nor the negative advertisements it spawns are unique to late twentieth and early twenty-first century public discourse. Walt Whitman, for example, used terms such as “pimps,” “murderers,” “malignant conspirators” and “pimpled men, scarr’d inside with vile disease” to describe those who participated in the Democratic nominating conventions before the Civil War (Jamieson 56-57). Examples of uncivil public discourse are seemingly easy to locate in the historical development of this country’s media and politics. Still, the notion of public
discourse is a useful frame from which to gauge the degree to which society is meeting its “civil” aims. In other words, if rampant uncivil public discourse exists, then, it should consistently be reflected in the attitudes of our citizens. In his book, *The Good Citizen*, Michael Schudson explores this relationship between public discourse and the concern that everyday citizens no longer demonstrate the democratic *elan* that Tocqueville recognized in 19th century America. Schudson points out that indeed the America that Tocqueville witnessed no longer reflects the “many moral and civic associations” traditionally associated with good citizenship and strong communities (*Good* 101).

More interestingly, however, Schudson contends that public life in America is not in a state of decline. What many critics interpret as civic decline is really “successive restructurings of American civic life, each of which involves a recalibration of citizenship and civic practice” (Bender 27). Schudson is careful to point out that attempts to depict contemporary public life as a disintegrating fragment of its former state should avoid the valorization of citizen participation in the past, for while it may be true that people both attended and participated in the Lincoln-Douglas debates, it is not apparent exactly what they attended to in those debates, or if they were “interested in issues of transcendent importance” (*Was There Ever* 145). It seems reasonable to claim that the meaning, significance and appeal of politics has narrowed (Bender 30). However, as Dewey suggested, the passive public was historically created and is “not an essential condition of modernity” (Bender 32).

Still, participation remains a necessary criterion to assess public discourse today, for it characterizes those deliberative models of political action which emphasize a “preference for local, voluntary approaches” (Anheier 87). The idea of participation is
also a developing concern for marketers as they seek new ways to engage consumers dialogically. Equally as important, the meaning of participation today, on public discourse, is more profound when considered in relation to civil society’s historical tradition. The model of good citizenship required of a strong civil society, for example, is aptly reflected in Aristotle’s depiction of public life in Athens which binds the moral excellence of citizens, *arête*, to the health of the *polis*. Aristotle, in *Politics and Poetics*, develops this connection by suggesting that “a city can be virtuous only when the citizens who have a share in the government are virtuous” (Book VII, Ch. 8, 251). Those citizens, then, “who did not continuously improve by developing whatever talents they possessed were treated with disdain” (Murray 242).

This definition of a citizen implicates the degree to which one may participate in matters that are concerned with the public good. Those citizens who do not embody the required qualities of the “virtuous” citizen are judged as useless, for as Skaperdas, and others show, the etymology of “idiot,” *idiotai*, is that of a “private person, someone who does not participate in public affairs” (41). Gradually, the notion of citizen, as *idiot*, also took on the connotation of someone who is incapable of participating in public affairs (Ibid). Aristotle makes politics the focus of the life of a competent citizen. The citizen is most excellent in pursuit of citizenship, since “the true student of politics, too, is thought to have studied virtue above all things; for he wishes to make his fellow citizens good…” (*Nichomachean*, Book I, Chapter XIII).

In addition, Aristotle, in his *Politics and Poetics*, prescribes how the public function of citizen will ultimately bear on the strength of a society that thrives on civil, democratic underpinnings:
He who has the power to take part in the deliberative or judicial administration of any state is said by us to be a citizen of that state; and, speaking generally, a state is a body of citizens sufficing for the purposes of life. (Book III, Ch. 1, 81)

Enslin, cited in Abowitz and Harnish, situates the role of citizen in democratic society by showing how citizenship: “(a) gives membership status to individuals within a political unit; (b) confers an identity on individuals; (c) constitutes a set of values, usually interpreted as a commitment to the common good of a particular political unit; (d) involves practicing a degree of participation in the process of political life; and (e) implies gaining and using knowledge and understanding of laws, documents, structures, and processes of governance” (653). It must be pointed out that citizenship in the Athenian polis contrasts substantially with that of contemporary American politics. Undoubtedly, a city-state populated by a few thousand entitled citizens can more effectively procure direct political involvement than a nation of a couple hundred million eligible voters. What is more, the American system of governance reflects Madison’s bias against trusting open deliberation (Hauser, *Vernacular* 28-29). Ultimately, the Athenian polis works on a principle of a single public sphere that does not represent the reticulate nature of those discursive arenas which make up contemporary public life (Hauser, *Vernacular* 20-21).

Under closer scrutiny, an etymology of citizenship shows that democracy is not always a guarantor of good citizenship, and often competing political theories of citizenship vary on the role and necessity of citizen participation in a civil society, e.g., liberal versus deliberative, or civic democratic forms. Goldwin, for example, claims that
our pursuit to sustain civil behavior in our time can be attributed more to codes of
conduct inherited by outdated traditions “handed down from other times and ways of
life” rather than any particular doctrine or characteristic of our constitutional liberal
democracy (54). I argue, however, that, regardless of the influence of our democratic
legacy, the notion of citizenship is tied to the rhetorical development of civil society. In a
rhetorical understanding of civil society, emphasis is given to the role of rhetoric and its
power to “create new political realities within the open-ended possibilities of a
democracy” (Hauser, Vernacular 17). The conditions for a civil public discourse are
dependent on appropriating the actual discursive practices of people in the process of
engaging one another. The meaning derived from such discursive engagement is located
in the particular historical conditions of conversation. Discursive engagement worthy of
being described as civil must be framed from the way in which public discourse is
developed and expressed.

Shils aptly points out that the attitude which distinguishes the politics of a civil
society is civility, i.e., “a solicitude for the interest of the whole society, a concern for the
common good” (1). From a rhetorical perspective, an understanding of the common good
advances a belief that the discursive practices of everyday people occurring over many
discursive arenas will yield a shared reality through the collective reasoning process in
which people develop and express their opinions. The notion of civility is often used as a
linchpin between civil society and democracy. Civility, in this context, implies a form of
democratic communication characterized by the communicative capacity to participate in
discursive processes that affect public decision-making.
McClean, for example, argues that democracy represents the necessary means to “maximize the participation in governance or the exercise of freedom of the members of the community, thereby enabling them to live more fully as persons and groups so that the entire society flourishes” (94). Perez, likewise, equates participation to the higher human faculty of freedom, e.g., the “freedoms that derive from participation in community life,” of having “a role in determining the community’s future,” and being a part of one’s governing structure (71). As pointed out earlier, though participation is often considered an essential condition of civil society, it does not necessarily mean that more participation translates into a more civil society or a stronger democratic state. What makes participation a vital element of civil society is the rhetorical influence of those groups of people who can demonstrate participation in discursive practices that have public consequence. It is not important for all to participate as some modern theorists of deliberative politics advocate. It is more important, though, to recognize that those who do participate contribute to the development and expression of discourse in some meaningful way.

**Situating Public Discourse in Civil Society**

One way to describe America’s political disposition is as a product of the principles of liberal democracy:

In today’s parlance, the USA developed a prototype of a liberal model of civil society and state-society relations, where a low level of government spending (social welfare, health, education, culture) is associated with a relatively large non-profit sector that is engaged in both actual service provision and advocacy. (Anheier, 87)
The goal of the liberal-democratic tradition has “always been to achieve a high degree of individual freedom and autonomy while maintaining a viable, sustainable order” (Beem 13). While civil society, as a concept, is rooted in the political structures of Ancient Greece, the modern notion of civil society is significantly influenced by Enlightenment-era thinkers (Ghaus-Pasha 237-238). In the modern period, the concept of civil society has developed from two lines: the Hegelian and Tocquevillian legacies (Beem 55). Hegel, though sometimes considered a critic of the modern concept of “civil society,” can be viewed, nevertheless, as the “theoretical forerunner to today’s civil society movement” (Beem 94-95). The notion of economy and, therefore, the marketplace are shown as immanent to an understanding of civil society, for civil society itself begins with the individual who “seeks both to express his individuality and to concretize his existence by acquiring and possessing things: in a sense, I have, therefore I am” (Beem 96). In a civil society though, the astute individual will come to understand that personal acquisition is tied to one’s ability to cooperate with others:

In the course of the actual attainment of selfish ends- an attainment conditioned in this way by universality-there is formed a system of complete interdependence, wherein the livelihood, happiness, and legal status of one man is interwoven with the livelihood, happiness, and rights of all. On this system, individual happiness, etc. depend, and only in this connected system are they actualized and secured. (Hegel 64)

Hegel suggests a communicative basis upon which political and economic systems can be rationalized and, thus, prefigures a valid discursive space inside the marketplace. Such a discursive space recognizes that private interests are ultimately tied
to common or public good(s). Moreover, the notion of “corporation” becomes the key
signifier to describe the “central means” by which individuals begin to recognize these
common goods (Beem 98). Likewise, an argument can be made that a civilized society is
inclusive of commercial society, for “only a civil society was believed to create the
framework necessary for the development of a civilized and commercial society” (Parekh
16). Thus, “virtually all serious observers understand that liberal political and economic
institutions depend on a healthy and dynamic civil society for their vitality” (Fukuyama
4).

Today, the marketplace serves an integral role in the “governance” of society
(Rizvi 95). The notion of governance reflects the discourse on reinventing government by
inviting the market as well as private and commercial firms working for profit, networks,
and associations to share in the management of the collective affairs of society (Ibid).
This is not to say that marketers are now expected to do the work of governments. The
marketplace serves civil society when it remains autonomous, yet accountable, not only
to its own economic bottomline, but also to its many stakeholders. Stephen Davis,
therefore, calls for an integrative civil society where the marketplace is capable of
working within the boundaries of civil society:

Market players will have to create what amounts to a new international
constitution of economic activity capable of drawing the confidence of
publics around the world…the global market ideal implicit in a civil
economy is one in which institutional owners, accountable to their
millions of savers, push corporations toward sustainable prosperity
through socially responsible management. Put as a simple equation, if
accountability plus social responsibility equals shareowner value, we achieve the civil economy. (2)

From Hegel through Davis, the argument that modern civil society is inclusive of economy and marketplace is warranted. Whereas Hegel provides a justification for conceiving of a role for the marketplace in civil society, Tocqueville gives the modern conception of civil society a fundamental place in democracy, for in addition to providing warnings and prescriptions about citizenship, “he explores how we can best preserve and promote public or civic life in a modern democratic society that is marked increasingly by privatism and noninvolvement” (Schleifer xiv). Accordingly, Tocqueville identifies associations, i.e., “individuals freely coming together to pursue a common interest,” as foundational to democratic culture and civil society (Beem 63). While Tocqueville asserts religion and family as equally important social institutions, associations provide the communicative and rhetorical bases for a discourse primed for public life:

Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all minds are constantly joining together in groups. In addition to commercial and industrial associations in which everyone takes part, there are associations of a thousand other kinds; some religious, some moral, some grave, some trivial, some quite general and others quite particular, some huge and others tiny. Americans associate to five fetes, to found seminaries, to build inns, to erect churches, to distribute books, and to send missionaries to the antipodes. This is how they create hospitals, prisons, and schools. If finally they wish to publicize a truth or foster a sentiment with the help of a great example, they associate. (Tocqueville 595)
Taken together with Hegel, Tocqueville’s civil society is shaped by a public discourse that aims to produce the ideal social, political, and marketplace conditions through the cooperative efforts of its citizens. Associations represent a social ideal which enables them to “maneuver through the real world of democratic politics and achieve its desired ends” (Beem 65). Society is, thus, made civil as its members exercise the communicative capacity to solve problems and foster cooperative associations that can be independent of state, yet competent enough to cooperate in the marketplace to satisfy both economic self-interest and address questions of public good. As Ghaus-Pasha shows, among those characteristics most relevant to a model of modern civil society, “networks of public communication” are deemed essential to the pursuit of effective community problem solving and cooperation (238).

Much of the scholarship on public discourse seeks normative ground from which to justify civil society in democratic terms. While Ryfe, for example, shows that good democratic politics depend on good public discourse, a revitalization of civic life should, then, make political institutions more “communicative” (163). Ryfe’s “principles of good public discourse” point the way to rhetorical civil society as the model from which everyday people resuscitate the public role Tocqueville found basic to modern civil society. Of the six principles that Ryfe offers: formal democratic procedures, reflexivity, reciprocity, radical difference and moderation, the notion of grounded rationality suggests the discursive rationale most compatible with a rhetorical interpretation of the way public discourse can function in civil society today (168-170). Grounded rationality confronts the reality that public discourse does not always take the form of a reasoned dialectic constructed in formal discursive settings by interlocutors adept in the skills of
argumentation. As Hauser shows, a rhetorical understanding of public discourse in modern civil society is inclusive of the “vernacular exchanges” that comprise those diverse, discursive arenas of our community (Vernacular 67). As we construct a civil public discourse, we “acquire its vernacular language in order to share rhetorically salient meanings” (Ibid). Vernacular rhetoric is essential to ascertaining the conditions of civil public discourse because it realistically demonstrates what scholars identify as an essential ingredient of civil society, i.e., the ability to show how ordinary people are shaping the character of public discourse.

Situating public discourse today also requires an historical awareness of the meaning of civil society; a social and political shift from the civic virtue orientation “permeating Greek and Roman political thought” to the Enlightenment emphasis on “relationships among diverse groups and interests” (Hauser, Vernacular 21-22).

Attention to its historicity demonstrates both our conception of public discourse in civil society and justification as a moral framework for normative human relations with those for whom we may not share the same values and interests. When civil society emerged from the Enlightenment as a third arena independent of the state, a new model of social organization made possible the capacity for citizens to engage in democratic self-regulation in and through multiple discursive forms. The shift from civic virtue to civil society created more spaces for discursive engagement:

The transition from civic virtue to civil society has changed the locus of rhetoric’s purview from the sites of official discourse to the spheres of interaction within society where publics form and express opinions that bear on the course of society. However, this does not diminish the
importance of rhetoric as an inventational social resource. Rather, this shift provides the basis for exploring the rhetorical conditions in which publics form, form opinions, and assert their authority to guide governmental actions (Hauser, Vernacular 23-24).

In civil society, individuals enjoy the freedom to act publicly by negotiating, arguing, struggling against, or agreeing with each other and with the representatives of political and economic authority (Kaldor 192). It can be argued that our concept of civil public discourse today is grounded in the tension between the echoes of public virtue and a vague sense of propriety. One way of addressing this tension is to reconstruct public discourse rhetorically by showing that civil society is directly related to the principle of the public sphere and an understanding of its rhetorical features (Hauser, “Civil Society” 30-31). In other words, civil public discourse is shaped by those publics that develop in response to a need or situation, the opinions they express (public opinion) and the network of associations in which publics make their opinion known (public spheres). Each of these rhetorical features provides a theoretically coherent structure in setting the foundation for the exercise of public discourse in civil society.

The Rhetorical Features of Civil Society

The notion of “public” has a long history. Although it first often referred to the “area, property, or income of the state” in Roman antiquity, beginning in the seventeenth century, “publics,” took on the meaning of “private individuals rendering judgment on what they read, observed, or otherwise experienced” (Van Horn Melton 1). These “publics” grew in significance as cultural and political arbiters created by “expanding networks” of a culture of consumption and a political realm legitimized by the belief that
A mass collectivity of people was capable of expressing a coherent opinion, i.e., public opinion (Melton 1-2). The transformation of the private subject to public person shows the evolution of the way individual members in society came to be identified as a public. In his essay, “The Social Contract,” Rousseau calls our attention to this issue of identity formation in publics:

Before, therefore, we consider the act by which a People chooses their king, it were well if we considered the act by which a People is constituted as such. For it necessarily precedes the other, and is the true foundation on which all Societies rest. (Balibar 105)

Rousseau, thus, makes the notion of public a necessary condition of social organization by implying the question: what makes a public? The scope of competing theories that offer a definition of public is neatly laid out in “Weintraub’s taxonomy” (Staeheli and Mitchell 795). Weintraub situates the prevailing theoretical approaches on public over four categories: liberal-economistic, republican-virtue, sociability, and Marxist-feminist (Ibid). Each of these approaches emphasizes a different, albeit, important character of publics. While the liberal-economistic version, for example, stresses basic rights and freedoms for individuals, the republican-virtue model conceptualizes the public as “community, the polity, and citizens” (Ibid). Moreover, the sociability model makes “symbolic display” and “self-representation” the basis for a public while the Marxist-feminist interpretation focuses on the public as it relates to state and economy (Ibid).

Though Weintraub’s categorization does not represent an exhaustive accounting of public, it does produce a number of relevant coordinates for understanding how public
is bound, in the literature, to questions of space and publicity, including public and private boundaries, publicity and privacy, public and private goods and public and private spaces or spheres (Ibid). In what he describes as the “basic blueprint” of the “public sphere,” Habermas, in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, shows the historical constitution of public. The meaning of public emerged as private people, coming together to form a public, “readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion” (Habermas, Structural 25-26). It was within this private social realm that the embryo of modern civil society began to take shape (Van Horn Melton 5). Habermas, thus, defines a public as contingent to an emerging public sphere and the capacity to hold public authority to the scrutiny of “critical” publicity (Habermas, Structural 24). The language used to identify the formation of publics nurtures conceptual ground from which to build an interpretation of the rhetorical nature of publics. As Hauser shows in Vernacular Voices, any attempt to understand public from a rhetorical framework must simultaneously consider its relation to publicity, public sphere and public opinion.

Perhaps, the most compelling scholarly discussion useful to discovering the rhetorical identity and function of public in modernity proceeded from the public debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. The Dewey-Lippmann debate took place primarily in the 1920s, beginning with the release of Lippmann’s 1922 Public Opinion and Dewey’s subsequent review of that work in the New Republic (Whipple 158). The notion of public became a central concern within competing arguments on how best to deal with perceived deficiencies of democracy. Though these men disagreed in their prescriptions, their philosophical differences on the nature of the human being and the
nature of democracy underscore their attempt to explicate those innate human qualities that constitute the communicative power of the masses in democratic society. From their writings it can be inferred that a public is, thus, constrained by the potential capacities of the individual negotiating his/her world. In other words, a public powerful enough to act and bring about significant and salutary public outcomes rests on the communication competencies of individual citizens. Here, Lippmann signals a dire view of a rhetorically capable public:

> The individual man does not have opinions on all public affairs. He does not know how to direct public affairs. He does not know what is happening, why it is happening, what ought to happen. I cannot imagine how he could know, and there is not the least reason for thinking, as mystical democrats have thought that the compounding of individual ignorances in masses of people can produce a continuous directing force in public affairs. (*Phantom* 29)

Lippmann pronounces the masses “naturally and structurally unable to form intelligent and democratic publics,” thus, defining their role in society as passive spectators rather than the active participants who drive democratic processes (Whipple 160). Consequently, Lippmann calls for the public to be put in its place while the business of political decision-making is best left to a “professional public” of “more or less eminent persons” (Ibid). In Lippmann’s estimation, a public is a mere “phantom” to the extent that there could be a “genuine and effective public” (McClay in *Phantom*, xxvi). Dewey, however, saw publics as more operative, and, therefore, presented an
optimistic vision of democracy in the twentieth century, i.e., the promise of democracy and the possibility of an active public is rooted in the life of community.

For Dewey the idea of a public capable of overcoming the limitations of a modern industrialized society, i.e., to actively participate in relevant public decision-making processes was dependent on the realization of a “Great Community” (*The Public* 142). His metaphor for a rhetorically capable public as the “ideal of a community” is reflected in “actual phases of associated life” and constitutes the idea of democracy (*The Public* 149). Dewey describes the conditions for the emergence of a public as embedded in the Great Community:

> From the standpoint of the individual, it consists in having a responsible share according to capacity in forming and directing the activities of the groups to which one belongs and participating according to need in the values which the groups sustain. From the standpoint of groups, it demands the liberation of the potentialities of members of a group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except when different groups interact flexibly and fully in connection with other groups. (147)

The Great Community, according to Dewey, fosters the conditions under which a group becomes a viable public, i.e., a public is activated through communication which allows the Great Community to be, in the sense of “free and full intercommunication,” conceivable (*The Public* 211). However, as Dewey points out, the political power of the public which comprises the associational character of the Great Community is grounded
in the local rather than mass level since “vital and thorough attachments are bred only in the intimacy of an intercourse which is of necessity restricted in range” (*The Public* 212). The emergence of publics at the local level, then, forms the basis for participatory democracy as they develop from their communication activities in, for example, problem-solving associations (Bender 32).

Dewey’s enthusiastic prognosis for democracy is accommodated by a citizenry exercising their basic human communication capacity to hear and speak, for the “difference between watching and speaking is the difference between being a spectator and a participant” (Whipple 161). Lippmann’s dismal portrayal of the passive citizen in representative democracy and Dewey’s notion that people are naturally participative, create a dialectical tension regarding the function of communication in the formation of publics. While Lippmann subjugates the public primarily to the role of receiver in the act of public discourse, Dewey sees the public as co-creator of meaning and message since the function of communication is to “involve humans in the act of constructing the truth” (Ibid). Dewey, thus, prefigures a rhetorically capable public who, by their communicative nature and associational character, form a democratic community. The “activity” of human beings in communication, Dewey posits, gives a public its power. The public, situated in community and defined by their associations, develop an identity as individuals participating “in behalf of activities that, by means of symbols, are communicable and shared by all concerned” (Dewey 153).

The idea that a community coheres around shared concerns suggests an ideal condition that often problematizes the effectiveness of a public. Hauser sees this problem as typical of heterogeneous societies:
Except for the most transcendent causes and problems, such as natural disasters, epidemics, or national emergencies, hotly contested public issues parse along lines of age, gender, region, ethnicity, class, and a host of considerations that lead to incompatible and, perhaps, incommensurable attitudes and beliefs. (Vernacular 30)

Hauser’s point anticipates his rhetorical model of the public sphere which admits difference and diversity in publics. It also highlights an often repeated critique of Habermas’ democratic political theory. Habermas’ publics historically emanated from the bourgeois public sphere that formed public discourse from rational, critical debate. The public assented to universal standards for argumentation that functioned as a kind of starting point or common ground for discursive engagement. Publics emerged through this act of practical discourse. The difficulty with appropriating this historical standard today, according to Hauser, is that ours is a “society defined by the conditions of diversity” which would “appear to be the lack of precisely this necessary starting block for building successful rhetorical appeals” (Vernacular 31). For Hauser, the problem of a society comprised of competing publics invites the notion of civil society, then, to be reframed as a product of discourse rather than dialectical agency and proceduralism.

The power of communication, as Dewey has shown, lies in its potential to demonstrate the social will of a people. Hauser recognizes rhetoric as precisely the communicative power necessary to negotiate meaning in a diverse society, for rhetorical power helps forge identities among publics as well as manages differences with other groups and potentially changes the normative practices of civil society:
…Rhetoric also enables the enunciation of alternative relations that challenge and even disrupt community. Rhetoric manifests a human capacity to deal with antagonistic relationships precisely those relationships that typify the conditions from which publics emerge and in which societies produce themselves. (*Vernacular* 117)

In other words, rhetoric is the communicative force from which people will create themselves as a public when rhetorical conditions necessitate addressing matters of public exigence. Rhetoric gives to those publics a potential to construct knowledge and power which is the function, as Dewey points out, of communication. Hauser answers the question, what is a public? by showing how rhetoric serves as the social *dynamis* that brings public into being in that “our conceptualizations of publics are altered by starting with rhetoric as their antecedent condition and projecting rhetoric as their creative agency” (*Vernacular* 117). Rhetoric is therefore bound to a public’s capacity to produce itself. Public discourse, then, represents the potential for a public to organize itself, as the act of “speaking, writing and thinking involves us –actively and immediately- in a public, and, thus, in the being of the sovereign” (*Warner* 69).

**The Public Sphere in Civil Society**

Hegel and Tocqueville show that civil society can be framed from a marketplace perspective (corporation), as well as a socio-political perspective (democratic association). At first glance, each point of view seems to suggest that publics are treated either as consumers, or citizens, but not both. From a rhetorical perspective, however, the public in civil society is a product of their communicative capacity as well as the “vast and complex communication network” in which they engage others, i.e., the public
sphere (Baynes 216). The importance of the notion of public sphere, in political theory, is its practicability as a space for political discourse. Eder argues that the basis of modern government in the west is defined by a public sphere whose members demonstrate the idealized power of democracy so often assigned to the notion of “we the people” (609). Confronting the question posed earlier by Rousseau, Eder shows how public spheres transform people into governing publics:

Who are the people? The theory of the public sphere has shaped the answer: government has to be accessible to the public, must be accountable to the public, and provide sites where this public can act to control government and to make it accountable. Thus, in the public we have to look for the people. (Ibid)

Eder’s diagnosis for democratic society presumes that its citizenry demonstrate an alacrity for participation. The idea that people are transformed into citizens through political participation is foundational to deliberative theories of democracy and the role of the public sphere. The importance of the public sphere, however, is not limited to political theory, for it is also operates as a mode of societal integration, i.e., the possibility that public discourse can coordinate human life (Calhoun 6).

As such, the contemporary discussion of public sphere stems from Habermas’ seminal critique of post-World War II western capitalist societies in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. Habermas makes two key claims concerning the public sphere. First, social changes in Germany, France and England during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created a situation where vast numbers of middle-class men (the bourgeois) came together to engage in reasoned, critical debate over
mutual concerns and key public interests. These areas of discursive activity facilitated a new public space which mediated between the state and the private person and provided these interlocutors with the consciousness and identity of a public (Roberts and Crossley 2).

Habermas subsequently developed a model for public discourse on the a priori condition that it follows an ideal, rational procedure whose aim is consensus. Second, social, political and economic conditions developed to undermine the vitality of the burgeoning public sphere such that, in the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, the public sphere was “significantly reduced in scope and influence and decision-making became an increasingly technocratic prerogative” (Gardiner 28). Among Habermas’ concerns is that contemporary political institutions “disguise the changing structure of the public sphere” by manufacturing public belief that the public sphere continues to function as it did since its inception (Calabrese and Burke 54). As a result of the “structural transformation” of the public sphere, Habermas shows that the quality of public discourse has dissipated as the public sphere lost democratic legitimacy, i.e., the public sphere is no longer shaped by a rational, critical, and open discussion of public issues:

Large organizations strive for political compromise with the state and with each other, excluding the public sphere whenever possible. But at the same time the large organizations must assure themselves of at least plebiscitary support from the mass of the population through an apparent display of openness. (“The Public Sphere” 54)

The notion of a physical space for autonomous public discourse, that is, a genuinely discursive public sphere, is key to Habermas’ understanding of civil society.
The public sphere is a self-regulated, communication arena which functions as a necessary buffer between the authority of the state and the privacy of the domestic realm. Under those historical conditions which contribute to its dissipation, communication becomes distorted while publics lose the force of public opinion, i.e., public opinion is manipulable by the instrumental (strategic) communication of agents working on behalf of state and the marketplace. Consequently, inherent in the discussion of those historical changes is the problem of distorted communication in the public sphere that Habermas refers to as its “colonization” (Communicative Action v. 2). Situating the problem in the context of this dissertation, Rutherford, recalling Habermas’ argument, claims that the public sphere has, thus, been appropriated by the marketplace. Theoretically, Habermas maintains that state and economy (marketplace) remain separate from civil society where social order can be regulated within the communicative function of everyday people in relation to one another without the excessive influence of power and money (Communicative Action v. 1). Habermas’ notion of the colonized public sphere represents one critical problem germane to a comparative study of modern civil society and the norms of public discourse. However, as Hauser shows, Habermas’ public sphere is historically situated and, thus, restricted to a public communication arena reserved for a particular socio-economic class of public:

In the context of civil society, however, the principle of public sphere is not confined to a single domain of social coordination. The network of associations by which post-Enlightenment western democratic society engages in self-regulation and which make public opinion an important assertion of will expressed outside authority and constraining on authority
admittedly includes the bourgeoisie. But as the feminist critique of Habermas’ formulation has made clear, using the bourgeois public sphere as the prototype limits our understanding of its character and function to one that has made a checkered history of class, gender, and ethnic exclusions. (‘Civil Society’ 31)

Hauser’s observation points to a second problem relevant for an understanding of the public sphere in modern civil society; the realities of public life do not reflect a rational public discourse created by an ideal public. This apparent fact led Schudson to argue that such a public sphere never even existed in America, for when descriptions of public life in the American past are examined, “there is not much to suggest the rational-critical discussion Jurgen Habermas posits as central to the public sphere” (‘Was There Ever’ 146). The modern public sphere, in other words, is more realistically formed by those discourses produced by dissimilar publics who utilize, at times, a non-rational basis for their production. Nancy Fraser, in her critique of Habermas’ model, proposes rather that the modern public sphere is shaped by “subaltern counterpublics” who represent “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (123). Fraser, thus, argues for an interpretation of public sphere that seeks a broader set of public spaces in which democratic participation is possible (Calabrese and Burke 56).

As proposed, the plural nature of modern western societies indicates that democratic civil society features not one, but many discursive arenas. This presumes that the viability of civil society is inclusive of discourse communities which reflect the
cultural changes our society is experiencing (Steinberg 251). Civil public discourse, according to Ryfe, must acknowledge that the public sphere today exists in a state of “radical difference” in which individuals are allowed “the right to speak in the voice of any of the groups to which they belong” (169). Fraser and Ryfe’s call for a public sphere, inclusive of the variety of discourses that frame differential publics, is the basis of Hauser’s notion of the “reticulate public sphere” (Hauser, “Civil Society” 1999).

The reticulate public sphere functions as a web-like communication structure that connects the variety of discourses which form over political, social and cultural networks. It follows, then, that at the heart of civil society are many public spheres made up of a “network of associations” whose members, through social interactions, regulate themselves in ways consistent with the plurality of rhetorical modes of communication, symbolic expression and problem-solving found in democratic civil society (Hauser, *Vernacular* 21). Hauser’s reticulate public sphere provides a setting, in theory, to legitimize diverse discourses through a quasi-deliberative process. His theory of the reticulate public sphere works within the belief that deliberative discourses are “open to all, and participants must be unconstrained in the arguments they make” (Polletta and Lee 701). In other words, deliberation should be free of outside control and agreement is uncoerced (Ibid). As is, the deliberative function of discourse, requisite in Habermas’ theory, is not diminished in the reticulate public sphere; it is simply recreated through multiple rhetorical exchanges in many discursive spaces. Civil society is shaped by those discursive spaces which constitute the reticulate public sphere:

Our public deliberations occur in multiple forums not exclusive to those of the official political realm and they lead to opinions which when widely
shared set expectations for their consequences on official policies. We refer to this montage of discursive arenas as public spheres. But these arenas are situated in the larger and not always coterminous arena of civil society. (Hauser, *Vernacular*, 20)

Hauser’s public sphere aims to show how a discourse-based understanding of communication practices can provide a realistic alternative to the rational, formal discourse found in Habermas’ public sphere, yet maintain the goal of deliberation as a framework for public discourse. The entirety of these rhetorical exchanges demonstrates the communicative potential of everyday people to develop and express public opinion.

**Public Opinion in Civil Society**

So far, we have developed the character of public discourse in the context of modern civil society and examined the claim that we live in a time of uncivil public discourse. This claim is supported by research that confines the notion of civility to either inferior discourse emanating from a debased political system, and, or the absence of citizen participation in political, or civic life. Framed through Tocqueville’s profile of democracy here during the 18th century, the network of associations that have come to define civil society in America has declined substantially (Hauser, *Vernacular* 21). For example, statistical studies of key indicators show that over the past twenty-five years, our participation in civic and religious voluntary associations and patterns of community life have dropped and in some cases all but disappeared (Putnam).

This data is important, particularly as a gauge to measure the degree to which social capital becomes a factor in our capacity to build meaningful relationships with others. However, it is rather obvious to point out that America now is very different than
twenty-five, let alone, one hundred and seventy-five years ago. A decline in the number of people joining bowling leagues, or the local VFW does not necessarily mean that society is less civil. The public may not be participating in one area of civic life, however, they may be engaging one another in higher numbers, or with greater effectiveness, in another space that constitutes public life, such as a website dedicated to citizens interested in debating public issues of local relevance. Civil society today is shaped by the growing diversity of its people and the reshaping of those public and virtual spaces in which people engage with one another. The social interactions that characterize civic engagement, then, are dispersed across a network of public spheres that are sometimes traditional, as in an amateur sports league, to the less formal, such as people enjoying spontaneous talk at a Starbucks. These conversations reflect the potential for civil public discourse today.

Hence, the possibilities for civil public discourse is best approached from an understanding of those rhetorical conditions that enable a democratic civil society to flourish. The basis of this assumption rests on the belief that public discourse in modern civil society is the product of civic engagements expressed through a range of rhetorical acts that help form the identity of active, engaged publics, as opposed to disinterested subjects of state and economy. Furthermore, these publics occupy a fluid communicative space whose multiple discursive arenas form a reticulate public sphere of autonomous conversations, expressions and actions construed as public opinion. Modern civil society is thus refigured as a “rhetorical democracy,” for public opinion as a “rhetorical formulation and as a rhetorical expression, lies at the core of civil society’s role in contemporary democracy” (Hauser and Grim 5).
The significance of public opinion to a civil society, defined by conventional democratic aspirations such as freedom, property rights and citizen participation, can also be traced to the scholarly discussion of public sphere laid out previously. From this discussion, it is apparent that, similar to the notion of public sphere, the idea of public opinion is best understood as the product of complex historical conditions which have shaped its development through modern civil society. In the normative sense, public opinion should certify the “validity and legitimacy of conduct by bodies empowered to act and that can offer them (the public) instruction on how to act” (Hauser and Grim 6).

In other words, public opinion serves to legitimize those institutions that help maintain a civil society through a democratic process. Habermas examines the historical meaning of public opinion to establish its basis as a form of critical judgment by the people. This claim of “public as the carrier of public opinion” gives a body of citizens their public character as a rhetorical capacity Habermas calls “öffentlichkeit,” i.e., publicness or publicity (Structural Transformation 2). His account of the evolution of publicity depicts the traditional purpose of public opinion as a means to subject state authority to public (civil) scrutiny:

Because, on the one hand, the society now confronting the state clearly separated a private domain from public authority and because, on the other hand, it turned the reproduction of life into something transcending the confines of private domestic authority and becoming a subject of public interest, that zone of continuous administrative contact became ‘critical’ also in the sense that it provoked the critical judgment of a public making use of its reason. (Structural Transformation 24)
Habermas’ notion of publicity gives public opinion democratic legitimacy, in the traditional sense, i.e., guaranteeing the “connection between rational-critical public debate and the legislative foundation of domination, including the critical supervision of its exercise” (Structural Transformation 178). Splichal also points to publicity’s capacity to emphasize the “power of the individual’s reason, and the need to use it in public discourse, which would eventually give rise to public opinion” (12). Yet, the use of reason as a generalizable principle for legitimizing public discourse (public opinion) provides an interpretation of publicity at odds with the way the concept has been adapted in the twentieth-century. As Rutherford shows, Habermas distinguishes a “critical publicity” by its creative force to shape a purposeful political opinion of the people in the public sphere, but in recent times, Habermas laments, publicity has devolved into a form of manipulation where public opinion represents “propaganda managed views” and “authorized opinions” (20).

Though this change in the function of publicity clearly marks a troubling point of departure in the character of public opinion, the use of “public reason” here also signals a locus of scholarly criticism, for it represents a “rational deliberation model” of the public sphere which views public opinion “as manifest exclusively in citizen actions that reflect a rational consensus on the legitimate purview of the state” (Hauser, Vernacular 83). The rational deliberative model presumes an intelligent, informed public capable of reasoned public discussion. As suggested earlier, however, consensus-oriented discourse can limit the integrity of public opinion, therefore, it is a model often refuted. Benhabib has been one of the more outspoken critics of Habermas’ discourse ethics claiming that “consent alone can never be a criterion of anything, neither of truth nor of moral validity” (37).
Likewise, Hauser’s theory on vernacular rhetorics in the public sphere calls question to communicative rationality, and, therefore, invites those discourses that are not expressed as a part of rational discussion. Moreover, one has to ask whether a public demonstrating the criteria for such a public discussion has ever existed.

A second model of public opinion, the “opinion poll model,” is equally uncertain, yet generally accepted today as the standard for ascertaining public opinion. In the opinion poll model, public opinion is conceptualized in “scientific terms as a naturally occurring phenomenon that can be observed and described quantitatively” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 84). Polling seeks “democracy through technology,” yet as Schudson points out, this question of democracy is “not how to identify authentic, presocial opinion, but how to construct institutional mechanisms for arriving at public opinion” (*Good Citizen* 228). The public opinion model signals an historical shift in the meaning of public opinion, and as Habermas shows, is problematic for three reasons; it makes public opinion the product of pre-determined categories of opinion, it seeks out the loudest voice rather than the best argument, and it enables the loudest voice to become a technical tool open for strategic manipulation and control (Roberts and Crossley 6).

Inherent in each of these models of public opinion is the question of publics and the degree to which their opinions may shape the focus of public discourse and affect important public decisions. One of the key concerns in cultivating a discursive space for civil public discourse is the relationship, then, that ordinary people have with those institutions of state and economy, i.e., can everyday people participate in important decision-making processes that bear on the public good? This is an issue that Fraser and Habermas describe as the relationship between two types of publics; weak and strong
(“Rethinking” 134). Strong publics rule because they encompass both opinion-formation and decision-making while weak publics, lacking the same authority, do not rule (Ibid).

The important point for this dissertation, though, is that Habermas’ theory does not balk at the capacity for non-ruling publics to engage in deliberative discourses that bear on the public’s interest. In fact, as Chambers notes, “in being freed from the burden of authoritative decision-making, weak publics can become ‘contexts of discovery’” (13-14). Habermas’ allusion to “wild” and “anarchic” weak publics underscores the potential rhetorical power unfolding in informal and unstructured public discourses (Between 307). The wild and anarchic nature of the weak public allows for “new claims to emerge, hidden injustices to be unmasked, received truth to be questioned, and new forms of political participation to be tested” (Chambers 14). This view of civil society, then, plays an influential role in informal political activities both outside and against the state (Hendricks 487). It creates a theoretical basis to conceive of civil society as a discursive space for multiple public spheres shaped by an informal process of opinion-formation. A critical understanding of modern civil society must take into account the degree to which rhetoric will permit people to negotiate power either with state or marketplace rhetors, and achieve a level of self-regulation as a body of publics capable of solving problems and constructing norms of civil public discourse:

Whether civil society is colonized by the state and power elites, as Habermas depicts in his rendition of late capitalism, or remains open to the possibility of its own self-regulation is itself subject to the rhetorical possibilities and performances it can sustain. (Hauser, Vernacular 24)

Still though, adherence to either the rational deliberative, or polling models of public opinion risks ignoring the rhetorical features constituting public discourse in
democratic civil society, i.e., public opinion has a distinctly rhetorical character that is not operative, theoretically, in these models. A more practicable reading of public discourse in civil society requires a conceptual model based on actual discursive practices, i.e., a model that accounts for the way public opinion is developed and expressed given the constraints outlined in this chapter. A rhetorical model, therefore, more realistically demonstrates the way public opinion is formed and communicated since it emphasizes the “practical-reasoning endemic in the use of symbols to coordinate social action, or rhetoric” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 84).

In addition, a rhetorical model of public opinion abandons the belief that publics are an entity with continuous existence whose role is to legitimize all public matters (Ibid). Because rhetorical exchanges between publics are unpredictable and “particularized,” a rhetorical model of public opinion emphasizes the “processual character” of the formation of publics, i.e., the notion that publics manifest themselves as circumstances and issues warrant (Hauser, *Vernacular* 85). A rhetorical approach to public opinion, then, overcomes the reification of publics found in both the rational, deliberative and polling models by widening its scope to include both vernacular exchanges and those of institutional actors (Ibid). Moreover, public opinion, in the rhetorical model, forms “civil judgment” rather than consensus as a product of reasoned debate, or objective data as a product of instrumental measurement. Civil judgment expresses a “common understanding among diverse social actors” based on formal and vernacular exchanges which reflect the “associational character of relationships that depend on nothing beyond the common action of discussion and debate” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 74). Civil judgment is exemplified in letters, debates, commentary and
conversation seen and heard in the multiple discursive arenas that make up the reticulate public sphere. Therefore, public opinion is the product of a “collective reasoning process” rather than a formalized, deliberative procedure (Hauser, *Vernacular* 95).

Civil society, portrayed from a truly rhetorical perspective, demonstrates the capacity for everyday people to reconstruct part of a Tocquevillian-like existence through democratic participation in a public sphere braced to confront questions of identity and process, that is, the “who” and “how” of public discourse. This means that public discourse in civil society, when considered as an informal rhetorical process, is a product of rhetorical actors engaged in opinion-forming discourses which comprise a variety of associational settings that make public life a possibility. As a rhetorical mechanism characteristic of formal democratic processes, public opinion exercises communicative power when giving content to legislative agendas, limiting those agendas, and standing as a permanent publicity test for those agendas (Chambers 15). Yet, Habermas’ concern that the public sphere remains “infiltrated by administrative and social power and dominated by the mass media” is sufficient reason to examine the claim that public discourse is excessively influenced by marketing communication (*Between* 379).
Chapter 2: The Role of Marketing Communication and Civil Public Discourse

The Marketplace Function in Civil Society

Critical scholarship sometimes portrays the marketplace as antithetical, or at least at odds, with good citizenship. Habermas famously attributed the historical breakdown of the public sphere to those laws of the market, which govern the sphere of commodity exchange and social labor, pervading the “sphere reserved for private people as a public” (161). It is argued that as the public sphere changed, popular participation, a Tocquevillian anchor of civil society, gave way to mass consumption (Rutherford 19). Though consumption does not necessarily impede good citizenship, critics of consumer culture consistently cite it as an aggravating cause of society in decline. Ritzer, for example, warns that our social world risks immersion in consumption characterized by “nothing.” “Nothing” is described as an inevitable condition of consumption reflected in “social forms that are comparatively devoid of distinctive substantive content” (xi). If consumption becomes a prevailing social habit, Ritzer suggests, people’s lives are not only grounded in “nothing,” but it is also reflected in the quality of our public discourse.

Following this line of reasoning, places of conversation, essential to a rhetorical understanding of public discourse, can be substantially altered, for example, by the abundance of cookie-cutter retailers and chain restaurants which more often frustrate interpersonal communications (Eitzen 15). Hence, spaces of discourse lose the relationship-building qualities that give people “a sense of community and the comfort of meaningful connections with others” (Ibid). Changes in the marketplace are also noticeable in the twenty-first century workplace. Some critics have shown that the change in corporate climate from the 1990’s through today has contributed to a decline in
American social life and, thus, encumbers attempts to activate a more robust civil society. Ample research has focused attention on the way the modern workplace has increased demands on employees to the detriment of family life. In his book, *The Necessity of Politics: Reclaiming American Public Life*, Beem points out that a majority of parents believe that their families have been hurt by changes to corporate culture such as more stress and longer hours. The assertion that families are now more “squeezed for time” has been “given voice by a highly articulate and visible segment of the public, leading scholars and lay persons to question the legitimacy of time demands at work, the sacrifice of other values to the ever-faster production of goods and services, and the resulting burden placed on the family and the health of citizens” (Fuchs-Epstein and Kalleberg 2).

Arguably, more work and longer hours can improve chances for professional and personal success. In the early part of this century, economic life has become more prosperous for many Americans. Seventy-percent of households now have two or more cars while one in ten households own a vacation home (Samuelson 39). Yet, time spent building toward sustainable affluence can hinder one’s role as an active citizen, thus, making it more difficult to participate, at least formally, in those discourses that contribute to the public good. This argument is supported by the claim that the marketplace supplants those spheres of communication where people have traditionally engaged one another on important political and social matters, i.e., the public sphere (Habermas *Structural*). Consequently, the profile of a public person has shifted from forming associations with others that contribute to the public’s ability to manage itself outside of the state, to disengaging from others and focusing primarily on work and career. The result is a capitulation of the key discursive and decision-making processes
on public matters to legislators, social scientists, and policy experts. The complications of this shift are most poignant to our concept of *civitas*. Sandel, for instance, claims that as large corporations dominated the national economy, the autonomy of local communities diminished (205). More people began to withdraw from public life, most notably those who could afford to be disengaged from their neighbors. This is an economic reality particularly vexing for critical scholars who claim that as affluent Americans “buy their way out of reliance on public services, the formative, civic resources of American life diminish” (332). The crisis of modern civil society would seem to be a crisis of self-government and the dissipation of community if one accepts the claim that market forces threaten to “erode those aspects of community life that bring rich and poor together in public places and pursuits” (Ibid). Arguably, the single-minded pursuit of material things can deter good citizenship if it means that people retreat from those associations upon which civil society stands.

Though the aforementioned evidence suggests that a less than civic-minded attitude can prevail in market economies, if we are to conceive of a more dialogically-oriented relationship between marketers and their publics, framed in an ethics of civil public discourse, the marketplace must not be viewed as antagonistic to civil society. Beem, therefore, warns of the knee-jerk tendency in critical scholarship to cast the marketplace as the enemy of civil society:

There is nothing within the broad history of the concept of civil society that suggests that the market is disconnected from, and thus, completely irrelevant to, the institutions of civil society. On the contrary, civil society
theorists have, historically speaking, been almost universal in maintaining an intimate connection between the economy and civil society. (32)

A rhetorical understanding of the marketplace embraces, rather than rejects, the nature of market economy, for not only are markets a necessary condition of modern civil society, “the various institutions of society are difficult to distinguish from the economic” (Cahoone 228). It is important to differentiate, however, the essential economic function of a market economy from the critique that the marketplace encourages unreflective purchasing habits expressed, at worst, as unrestrained consumerism. This distinction is relevant in Habermas’ attempt to develop a theory of “communicative action” as a basis for civil public discourse in a market economy. Habermas’ critique of capitalism reveals a complex, but necessary relationship between economy (system) and society (lifeworld). His notion of communicative action demonstrates the metaphorical significance of “lifeworld” and “system” as social and economic coordinates kept in balance through the exercise of human discursive activity free from coercion and the domination of the marketplace (Communicative Action v. 2). Such a discourse points to one’s capacity to negotiate the marketplace as both an informed consumer and active citizen. Habermas contributes to a more advanced understanding of discourse by articulating the difference between a civil public discourse and discourse grounded in the business of marketing.

It is important, however, to maintain an understanding that modern civil society is shaped in great measure by its markets. A “civil modern society” must have a market economy in that people must work to live (Cahoone 229). As modern society is defined by its many institutions giving it order and meaning, the market economy exists as an essential institutional basis which contributes to the meaning and order of our civil
society. However, this does not mean that civil society must be synonymous with market society (Cahoone 228). In other words, a modern civil society is not defined solely by the prosperity of its markets. Civil society reflects a broader network of social, political and economic activity. An intriguing synthesis of civil society and market economy, then, is the notion of “civil economy.”

In his paper on civil economy, Davis advises that today’s global market demands a principle of civility in the marketplace to bridge concerns of society in decline and growing capital markets that exacerbate conditions for uncivil public discourse. A civil economy is the product of market agents, engaged shareowners, and civil society organizations pushing the marketplace toward “socially responsible management” (Davis, 3). Civil economy points to the possibility of cocreating an ethical discourse between marketers and engaged citizens defined, in part, by public accountability and responsibility in the marketplace (Ibid). The degree to which marketplace agents are willing to engage citizens signals the possibility for cocreating an ethical public discourse between marketers and citizens. Civil public discourse, then, challenges those critics who claim that the character of marketing communication is to merely serve the commercial interests of the marketer. Extending its meaning, then, civil economy represents a different way to conceive of the marketplace in which relationship-building, typically regarded as the telos of marketing communication, is reframed as those associations that emerge between marketers and its publics in discourses of negotiating meanings of accountability, profitability and social responsibility.
The Social Construction of Reality and Marketing Communication

Marketers rely on marketing communication initiatives to mold a public discourse that reflects positively on their products and services, brings attention and insight to consumer needs and attitudes, demonstrates the goodwill of the marketer in the community, and builds the marketer’s image in society as, for example, a good corporate citizen. Some critics of marketing communication, however, claim that it is the strategic aim of marketers to develop persuasive messages to help create a particular social world where the tone and character of public discourse reflect society’s preoccupation with marketing, i.e., public discourse becomes primarily a product of the ongoing transactional process between buyers and sellers. For example, observing these marketing communication efforts, Svensson characterizes public discourse as part of a “marketing realm,” i.e., a discursively constructed social reality where marketing professionals shape, maintain, and reproduce tastes, dreams, needs, identities and sign systems (1). The marketing realm, then, represents a cynical metaphor to critique a society whose public discourse has been re-directed toward talk of all things related to the process of marketing. Svensson insists that the marketing realm is a social phenomenon produced by the language of marketing and brought about by the tools of marketing communication.

Drawing from Svensson’s criticism, a crucial part of the strategic influence of marketers is their capacity to blur the line between an ideal public discourse, i.e., as Habermas would suggest, a discourse that reflects a rational, deliberative public conversation on important political and social matters, and marketing communication. The notion of an ideal public discourse approximates the character of a civil discourse by engaging the range of interests and issues that emerge when ordinary people, as publics,
offer them in various discursive arenas. On the other hand, in the marketing realm to have takes priority over to think, or to participate. The key to demonstrating the critique on marketing communication is to show how marketing language can shape those discourses that form social relations, as well as personal identities, and those “systems of knowledge and beliefs” that limit public discourse to talk centered mostly on consumption (Svensson, 4). These discourses, it is argued, further obscure the line between marketing communication and civil public discourse through the strategic use of marketing language. In this case, the critique would imply that marketing language helps create a social world whose meaning is grounded in one’s buying behavior.

The claim that language is used by human beings to construct such a reality is not unique. Demonstrating the arbitrary nature of language, Wittgenstein proposed that “it is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle. Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others. And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (19). Language, as Wittgenstein is famously known for suggesting, is like a game. And, it is this game-like quality that enables the architects of a given language, such as marketing professionals, to put forward a symbolic form (marketing communication) from which participants can make sense and meaning in their world, i.e., learn to be consumers. For instance, Fairclough shows that the place of language in society is not simply a complex symbol system used in human interaction, but rather more centrally involved in the construction of society and the resulting power dynamics used to maintain its social structures (14). Language is, thus, seen as discourse, i.e., a form of social practice determined by social structures that do not merely reflect reality, but shape it. Language, it can be argued, has a
dialectical relationship to social reality in that “language is a part of society; linguistic phenomena are social phenomena…and social phenomena are (in part) linguistic phenomena” (Fairclough 19).

We can see this dialectical relationship more practically operating in marketing language. In the realm of marketing communication, advertising copy intended to grab the attention of the consumer such as “buy one get one free,” suggests that language is being used to create a social phenomenon whereby a good is rewarded without expense to the consumer. The persuasiveness of the message depends on the consumer’s ability to accurately interpret the predominant social convention, in this case, nothing worthwhile is offered for free. Social reality is a consequence of language that shapes social practice as it is being shaped by already existing assumptions and conventions people hold about society. In Wittgenstein’s logic, because of the game-like arbitrariness of language, human beings use it to control and manage as much as to shape social order; language serves not only as a symbolic representation, but as a means of maintaining social power (Popp 5). And, as Morgan shows, the language of marketing “is not a neutral way of looking at the world; it has distinctive power effects for organizations, managers, consumers and society as a whole” (136). Power, though, does not necessarily imply unjust social relationships. Furthermore, marketing language is not a unique linguistic genre possessing a capacity to wield power unlike other linguistic forms.

In analyzing the critique of marketing language, however, it is suggested that the linguistic power of marketing lies in its use of marketing communication to bring about a particular world, i.e., a world that some critics claim serves the economic interests of marketers and often subordinates the role of its audiences to play along as an unwitting,
but necessary partner in marketplace games designed through marketing language. Marketing communication is, thus, argued to be a central part of this process “whereby a particular form of society is constructed” (Morgan 154). If society is both constituted by and reflective of a marketing realm, then, its discourse should reflect a “process of constructing the means through which people produce their own identity” (Morgan 136). In this representation, marketing communication is reduced to “informing customers about what is on offer and, in the process, articulating, and shaping needs” thereby significantly contributing to the way people think and act in their social world (Ibid). The scope of marketing’s linguistic power would seem to emphasize, then, the authoritative role of talk and writing in the marketing realm and its affect on people and society, i.e., marketing communication. In his critique of market society, Stephen Carter argues that the language of the marketplace reconstructs the language of civil society:

The words we use in our everyday lives are being shaped by the forces of acquisitiveness and self-seeking that characterize what was once called economic man. We scarcely seem to be aware that the change is occurring, but we should think about it every time a child sees an advertisement on television and runs to his parents to pronounce a sentence beginning, ‘I want…’- and every time a political candidate encourages us to think of government as simply a bureaucratic Santa Claus that distribute the goodies we desire. (168)

Carter’s point coheres with the critique of public discourse that portrays market economy as the chief contributor to discourse in decline. Carter represents one side of the debate on whether marketing communication serves civil society or degrades it. Yet, he
also signals how advertising, as the most ubiquitous form of marketing communication, is, arguably, the primary source of cultural production in post-World War II America. In this critique, marketing communication’s sheer scale and visibility is claimed to have helped shape a cultural landscape booming with “consumption communities” (Fairclough 166). When viewed as a consumption community, people define themselves as consumers and seek fundamental modes of gratification through consumption. Hence, marketers and advertisers are said to generate systems of meaning, prestige, and identity by associating their products with certain lifestyles, symbolic values, and pleasures (Leiss, Kline and Jhally 238). Advertising’s role is significant in this depiction of the consumption community because individuals depend on it for meanings, that is, as a source of social information embedded in commodities that mediate interpersonal relations and personal identity (Ibid). Advertising, received unreflectively it is argued, helps transform thinking individuals into indiscreet consumers, and, in doing so, brings about “a change in the way people are, in that sense that it has provided the most coherent and persistent models for consumer needs, values, tastes and behavior” (Fairclough 171).

It is clear marketing communication has a powerful affect on public discourse, in part, because marketing communication depends on rhetorical invention. And as previously pointed out, rhetoric helps forge identities, both the identity of publics and, as discussed here, self-identity. Additionally, critics of marketing communication claim to show that it is a dominant force in helping to shape a consumerist mentality. As a form of discourse, marketing communication can operate as modern propaganda in its capacity to mold the attitudes and actions of a mass audience. However, when viewed as a process of propaganda, the marketplace and its primary communication mechanisms are
functionally no different than any modern democratic state that employs propaganda to form the opinions of their publics. As Ellul attests, even the most “benevolent state will inform the people of what it does…but when dispensing such information, the government cannot remain coldly objective; it must plead its case, inevitably, if only to counteract opposing propaganda” (126-127). From Ellul’s argument, it can be deduced that the business of forming public attitudes is not unique to the techniques of marketing propaganda. Other sectors of human affairs rely on propaganda including politics, the law, and science.

In writing on the evolution of “technocracy” in America, Postman, for example, attributes the emergence of the Consumer Age to the “engine of technological progress,” i.e., the need to invent things (42). The agency of the human being mattered less than the need to objectify him/her to make for greater efficiency and standardization. As such, there is no clear evidence to connect the phenomenon of consumerism exclusively to marketing communication when the beliefs, opinions, and attitudes of the public are shaped by multiple discourses in and across a variety of social, cultural, and political spheres. Marketing communication can contribute to consumer culture, yet it cannot “attack the individual, break down his resistance” nor make his decisions for him (Ellul 10). Further complicating the claim that marketing communication leads to consumerism is the inability for such a critical stance to clearly articulate a practical alternative to a society organized by markets. Postman views this as Marxist theory that has “fallen into disrepute among believers” (80). Instead of the working class revolution that would signal the inevitable demise of the market economy, the “working classes of capitalist nations are sharing quite nicely in the bounties of nature while at the same time enjoying
a considerable measure of personal freedom” (81). The materialist orientation is
influenced by marketing communication, but the consumer may actively participate in the
marketing communication process by acting on, rejecting, or ignoring the exhortations of
marketers, thus, demonstrating the freedom to choose, or not choose to consume.

In the critique of the marketplace, the power of the marketer is not only attributed
to its use of language to construct social reality, but also the integration of modern
marketing with mass media which can be shown to shape public discourse in ways that
ordinary citizens cannot. This is not to say that marketers have an exclusive relationship
with the media nor are their communication tactics reserved only for the business of
marketing. Political discourse today is often the product of marketing communication
techniques, such as political advertising, which shape the character and direction of
public discourse. Yet, as is often the case in political campaigns, marketing
communication’s power to persuade emanates, not from the reasoned discourse of an
engaging rhetor or group of rhetors, but rather from the authority of the medium in which
its language is communicated. If we follow this critique, the variety of media that
marketers have at their disposal represents powerful, exclusive discursive arenas in which
the phenomenon of social construction and power is manifested and perpetuated (Popp,
Spitulnik). Mass media, thus, allows marketers the public space in which language can be
used to ground public discourse in the experience of marketing. Consequently, the social
practice of becoming a shopper par excellence in the marketplace is continually
reaffirmed by marketing language communicated through media that exists mostly
because of its commercial relationship with marketers, for the “ways of speaking featured
in media texts act as symbols that tie into prevalent ideas about what language can and
should do in society” (Popp 5). The concept of consumer is, thus, reinforced through marketing communication that continuously urges the mass public to buy. An assessment of the media/marketer relationship leads some observers to conclude that the authority of marketing language, as a privileged form of public discourse in the public sphere, cannot be sustained without the powerful agency of media. For this reason, some scholars, such as Habermas, argue that the relationship between media and marketers frustrate the cocreation of civil public discourse since ordinary people outside of the media/marketer alliance do not have ready access to today’s market-dominated public sphere:

Media are important sites for ethnolinguistic representation and the production of language ideologies. Utilizing certain linguistic varieties in national media can legitimate the social, economic, and political dominance of some social groups at the expense of others. It can have consequences for access to representation in the public sphere, and it may even contribute to language shift or the death of unrepresented linguistic varieties. (Spitulnik 149)

Spitulnik implies that a mass media awash with unremitting marketing messages privileges a marketing language whose aim is to show a particular representation of the world while concealing or excluding others, i.e., mass media serves to recreate consumer society. Furthermore, Spitulnik shows that marketers use media as forums for the symbolic representation of a world constructed by a marketing communication that decides the terms upon which one may be a participant in the discourse. Again, this was the concern of Habermas in his account on the decline of the public sphere:
The history of the big daily papers in the second half of the nineteenth century proves that the press itself became manipulable to the extent that it became commercialized. Ever since the marketing of the editorial section became interdependent with that of the advertising section, the press until then an institution of certain participants in the public sphere in their capacity as private individuals; that is, it became the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere. (185)

If we accept Habermas’ representation of the public sphere, i.e., a monolithic, privileged space for discourse, it can be argued that the media today occupy a central position from which to frame the direction and tone of public discourse. Consequently, the degree to which the ordinary citizen may be an active part of the public sphere becomes problematic as their capacity to engage issues, in a way that has public significance, is made marginal:

Representatives, such as journalists, political figures, academic experts and even ordinary citizens, stand in for citizens to speak and debate in the media, with citizens reduced to passive audience observers. Media simply provide information and surrogate debate, which citizens then use as individuals to vote. Does this eliminate the interactive and collective dimensions of the public sphere, reducing public opinion to polling statistics and vote counts? (Butsch 8)

Since marketplace talk is the focus of much of our public discourse, a challenging concern is the role the media will have in contributing to civil public discourse, for example, can mass media function as a public sphere for civil public discourse when
owned by global media corporations? Wessler and Schultz argue that the mass media has already become the most important forum for public deliberation in modern societies (16). However, when considering the extent to which the media can manage such deliberation ethically, the nature of how publics actually develop along with the way a public will express their opinions, represent a challenge for corporate media as they ascertain who gets to participate in the most privileged arenas of discourse as well as determine what counts as good public discourse. In other words, can the mass media adapt to the rhetorical conditions of democratic civil society? Also, can the media effectively understand what counts as good public discourse?

Some scholars have claimed, for example, that only those deliberative means that yield political decision-making count as high-quality public discourse (Meiklejohn, Sunstein). Yet, attempts to redefine theories of discourse so narrowly, such as a “structured conversation” leading to democratic decision-making, or as “top-tier” political discourse, are often challenged (Nickel). In mediated public deliberation, many scholars call for a “standard of openness or equal opportunity for topics, perspectives, interpretations, ideas and arguments” as an approach to offset claims of marketplace hegemony since “it would ensure that new ideas and ideas held by minorities get a chance of being heard” (Bernhard Peters qtd. in Wessler and Schultz 16). A turn toward more egalitarian attitudes in corporate media, however, will not necessarily ensure discourse that reflects a conventional, participatory model. According to the Advertising Age Datacenter, total advertising expenditures in the media in 2007 reached over 100 billion dollars (“Total U.S. Advertising Spending”). The relationship between the media and marketer is, debatedly, marked by profits first and not political equality. Yet, the
nature of this relationship is essential to a market economy in that marketers spending more money is usually a good sign for the economy (Schwartz 40). But how does this relationship figure into civil economy? Because mass media is not satisfied to rest on the latest technological innovation, marketers and consumers will work to create new opportunities to engage one another and other groups of people as mass communication becomes more personal. The surge of technological innovations that have characterized the communication landscape in the early part of the twenty-first century suggests that marketers and consumers have the capacity to use mass communication to create vital communities of discourse (Rodin and Steinberg 7). This is one practical reason why the depiction of the individual in market economy as consumer first, rather than citizen, is incongruous with the way in which consumers are actually using new media. As McConnell and Huba argue, consumers are “accelerating changes in traditional media structures, and they are spawning new forms of democratic and participatory collaboration” (25). Though western societies exhibit a tendency toward consumerism, the consumer demonstrates an alacrity to balance his/her buying habits with their own power of engagement on issues that have public meaning.

Because the media is so pervasive, as well as a principal social force shaping public opinion through marketplace rhetoric, it is necessary to examine how marketing communication shares responsibility for the claim that we live in a time of rampant incivility. In a civil economy, marketplace rhetoric is a necessary part of our social, everyday discourse. However, when framing public discourse in civil economy, the degree to which marketers can engage their publics dialogically raises the question of how marketplace rhetoric contributes to civil public discourse.
The Influence of Integrated Marketing Communication (IMC)

Marketing communication is a strategic communication practice (Madhavaram et al., Schultz et al., Christensen et al.). The basis of marketing communication is not the tactic used, but rather the concept that all communication is marketing and all marketing is communication (Schultz et al. 58). Integrated marketing communication is defined as a “seamless stream of communication with the customer” (Ibid). In each of these contexts, the aim of marketing communication is to both understand how best to contact the customer and know what needs to be communicated (Ibid). Therefore, marketing communication is generally understood as the ongoing effort of the marketer to know who they are talking to, communicate what needs to be said and “adapt” to their “wants and needs” (Schultz et al. 59). Integrated marketing communication (IMC) represents the marketing field’s ideal modern marketing strategic framework which guides marketing communication planning and execution. As discussed previously, modern marketing, from a rhetorical perspective, is best understood as a discursive process that aims to shape and make normative certain social attitudes and practices. Marketing “embodies,” in its discourse, specific marketing practices such as the formulation of strategy, market research and positioning (Svensson 3). IMC is the strategic ideal of marketing discourse. It evolved from an “unrecognized paradigm” of the 1980’s to its distinction today as the most influential strategic communication concept in the marketing discipline (Kitchen, Holm). Briefly tracing its historical development, IMC has taken its theoretical charge from early advertising theory. The first published theoretical model of marketing communication, for example, was St Elmo Lewis’ well-known AIDA (Attention-Interest-
Desire-Action) model of selling, published in 1898, followed by numerous sales communication models in the early part of the twentieth century (Reed and Ewing, 92).

Two important implications on the historical influence of IMC theory need to be drawn. First, early models of marketing communication coincided with the rise of mass markets and mass media, and second, the prevailing assumption upon which marketing communication theory was based suggested that “media messages could be implanted into an audience in a ‘uniform’ manner and that the audience would then directly respond” to the message (Reed and Ewing, 93). Though the “magic bullet” theory of mass communication has largely been dismissed, the notion that uniformity, in the construction, content, and delivery of marketing messages throughout mass media, remains a pillar of IMC praxis.

When mass media was transformed, with the advent of television after World War II, marketing communication theory, from the 1950’s through the 1980’s, sought to develop universal models of communication that demonstrated how consumer attitudes were the product of affective processing (Ibid). These assumptions provide the epistemological moorings of IMC, i.e., the communication process can be modeled, consumers are non-rational thinkers, and proper communication strategy can affect predictable outcomes. The history of marketing communication theory, then, reveals a search for enduring insights into both the act of mass communication and its key agents which could then be developed into a new strategic approach in the construction of marketing discourse. As a marketing management paradigm, then, IMC has not lost its momentum since the industry began to adopt its assertions in the early nineties.
Though marketing scholarship differs on whether IMC is being consistently implemented in practice, many studies, including one by the Association of National Advertisers, show that “achieving effective IMC campaigns is [sic] marketers’ primary concern” (Liodice 26). This means that 74% of organizations surveyed admit to using IMC principles for most brands (Ibid). Does this, then, demonstrate that marketing practitioners understand and practice IMC uniformly? While industry professionals and scholars continue to debate the meaning of IMC, the American Association of Advertising Agencies’ 1989 statement on its scope and relevance provides IMC with a generally accepted definition:

A concept of marketing communication planning that recognizes the added value of a comprehensive plan that evaluates the strategic roles of a variety of communication disciplines- for example, general advertising, direct response, sales promotion, and PR and combines them to provide clarity, consistency and maximum communication impact through the seamless integration [sic] discrete messages. (Christensen et al. 159)

What this suggests for the practice of IMC is that marketers should focus their attention primarily on how marketing messages can be more efficiently communicated, as in the case of coordinating all communication vehicles rather than on the communication role of the intended audience. Additionally, Duncan states the general prescription for IMC practice most often identified in the literature as “the cross-functional process for creating and nourishing profitable relationships with customers and stakeholders by strategically controlling or influencing all messages sent to these group and encouraging data driven,
purposeful dialogue with them” (8). Recent definitions of IMC seem to put the focus on the control of communication rather than dialogic engagement:

IMC is first and foremost a marketing-inspired vision on inspection, regulation, and control. In fact, it may be argued that the reason why the IMC discourse appeals to managers is because it legitimizes the organization and control of all communication functions. (Ibid)

IMC represents a paradigmatic change from previous marketing management theory in that marketing scholars allege more power has now shifted to the consumer (Liodice 26). Because consumers are thought to be “empowered,” marketing communicators are urged to take a “holistic approach to engaging consumers” (Ibid). This power shift suggests a number of innovations for marketing communication practice that enable marketers to gain a sense of control on the communication process. Most important of these is the industry’s appropriation of specialized language. For example, Christensen et al. explain how the language of IMC and its “implied notion of aligning and coordinating all communications has gradually become shared currency among marketers and advertisers” (159). The claim made by Christensen et al. mark a key concern of this dissertation, i.e., how can marketers engage its audiences in civil public discourse if strategic control of the communication process is its central aim? Or, does strategic planning impede the marketer from engaging consumers in dialogue?

The notion of an IMC language offers an analytical starting line from which to cultivate a critical understanding of the rhetoric of marketing communication including its influence on public discourse and its relevance for developing ethical marketing communication between marketers and their publics. Don Schultz, regarded as one of the early architects
of IMC theory, shows that IMC talk borrows closely from language used in the study of interpersonal communication:

The IMC approach is to refer to brand relationships, which are defined as the relationship that exits between buyers and sellers through the exchange of value for products or services over time. It is this reciprocity that will define buyer seller relationships particularly in interactive space. Both the buyer and seller are seeking reciprocity, and it is this shared value that creates ongoing relationships. (Schultz and Schultz 129)

Just as Habermas suggests that shared or mutual understanding is the aim of human communication, Schultz lays out IMC’S principle marketing philosophy in ambitiously comparable terms:

Interactivity is all about sharing- the dynamic sharing of value, meaning and information between marketer and customer…Yet, most marketing approaches are not based on sharing, but on winning…How can the marketing and communication approaches developed over the last 60 years hope to move marketers away from an attitude of winning to one of sharing?...What’s needed is a new way of thinking, a new corporate culture, and new approaches to marketing and communication… (Schultz and Schultz 125-126)

Measured alongside Duncan’s normative framework, IMC is characterized by four practical aims; strategic control of communication, scientific research to generate knowledge, relationship-building and dialogue. The language of “relationships,” or “relationship-building,” and “dialogue” are constructs of increased attention in the
marketing literature on the concept of relationship marketing since the 1980’s. Successful relationship marketing, sometimes referred to as “customer relationship marketing,” CRM, or, as Gummesson describes “total relationship marketing,” is said to occur when “a business collects information on its customers and treats that information with respect and security as it would any other asset…This is the beginning of creating customer loyalty, the purpose of customer relationship marketing” (Bulger quoted in Geddie et al.) Relationship marketing represents the market-oriented point of view in contrast to the production-oriented view from which marketing may be regarded as a philosophy (Takala 2). IMC is the strategic expression of this marketing philosophy whose aim is to utilize marketing communication as a means to build relationships.

Schultz et al. articulated this philosophy by forever linking IMC to the promise of building relationships through relationship marketing, e.g., “relationship marketing is the key to all future marketing efforts. It is only through integrated marketing communications that relationships can be built” (52). The aim of relationship marketing, then, is to create a permanent bond with the customer where sales can be increased in the long term (Takala 2). Kavali et al., however, stress that the strategic significance of building relationships through marketing extends beyond obvious economic concerns. IMC utilizes relationship marketing techniques that help to shape the way people will ultimately understand their role in society:

Relationship marketing is a process of planning, developing and nurturing a relationship climate that will promote a dialogue between a firm and its customers which aims to imbue an understanding, confidence and respect of each others’ capabilities and concerns when enacting their role in the marketplace and society. (Kavali et al., 576)
Kavali et al. make an important point for this dissertation. The role of IMC has changed from Schultz’s focus on the transactional basis of the marketer/consumer relationship to the way in which marketing communication can be used to forge relationships that emerge as each participates in the construction of society. And since society is the product of discourse, the relationship between marketer and consumer is more effectively understood through the discursive engagements that shape the marketplace.

Clearly, IMC affects public discourse through its marketing communication. As it stands, the significance of relationship-building, as a practical aim of marketing communication, reflects a marketer’s need to achieve strategic outcomes by reframing the aim of marketing communication as dialogue. If IMC has a teleology, then, it is the enactment of dialogue through relationship-building with its audiences. Marketers have appropriated the concept of dialogue as a key communication principle and fundamental to relationship marketing, for it is through dialogue that “‘mutual understanding, confidence, and respect can be cultivated and the capabilities and concerns of each party fully articulated and taken into account’” (Saren and Tzokas quoted in Kavali, et al. 579). Commenting on its teleology, Dewhirst and Davis provide what critics, following in the tradition of Habermas, would interpret as an instrumental rationale for IMC:

IMC is a cross-functional process for creating and nourishing profitable relationships with customers and other stakeholders by strategically controlling or influencing all messages sent to these groups and encouraging data-driven, purposeful dialogue with them. (81)

Relationship-building and dialogue, then, provide marketers with both a strategic aim and a vocabulary through which to articulate the field’s philosophical disposition. The
philosophy of marketing communication is driven by a marketer’s belief that they can know their audiences with a degree of predictability and develop the communication means to establish dialogic relations. This assumption is crucial to marketing epistemology and helpful to discern the way marketing communication may contribute to, or diminish, the quality of public discourse. If we are to understand the potential for marketing communication, then, to shape public discourse, it is necessary to examine the notion of marketing epistemology, for the way in which marketers communicate with their various publics is an effect of their research methodologies which seek to intimately know them, e.g., their publics’ needs, attitudes, lifestyles, values as well as the way they think.

**The Philosophy of Marketing Communication**

In 1923, Edward Bernays laid out the principles and practices of modern public relations in *Crystallizing Public Opinion*. Bernays coined the title “public relations counsel” to authorize a class of marketing communication experts who could “mould [sic] the action of his client as well as to mould public opinion” (*Crystallizing* 57). Bernays claimed that modern public relations came about because “organized activity, which depends on public support, needed a societal technician to counsel it- the counsel on public relations” (“Emergence” 296). Bernays’ seminal work on public relations provided a methodology for the practice of other vehicles of marketing communication by proclaiming that social science research provided the formula for understanding human behavior (Ibid). It is Bernays, then, who constructed marketing communication’s theoretical anchors from objectivist epistemologies typical of the behavioral and social
sciences. Because of this, the philosophical *raison detre* of IMC is rooted in scientific reasoning (Thomas, 322).

It can be argued that because marketers believe they can know their audiences objectively, the process of strategic communication planning is seemingly more rational and efficient which makes the communication process more manageable. This is partly the reason why much of the critical research on IMC suggests that its appeal, as discussed earlier, lies in its potential to allow marketing managers more “control” over the communication process (Cornelissen, Christensen et al.). Additionally, Murray and Ozanne show how research in the field has historically been dominated by objective-order paradigms, i.e., “most consumer research adopts a psychological orientation that focuses on explaining and predicting existing social behavior” (130). Marketers’ research methodologies tie marketing communication to a marketing epistemology, however, that has been drawing more scrutiny. Morgan, for example, cautions against marketing’s highly positivistic and normative approach to knowledge (155). A critical reading of marketing’s social science epistemology reveals problematic issues that emerge from Bernaysian principles. For example, it can be argued that Bernays’ diminished view on the intellectual competence of most human beings simultaneously degrades the normative practice of marketing communication:

The mental equipment of the average individual consists of a mass of judgments on most of the subjects which touch his daily physical or mental life. These judgments are the tools of his daily being and yet they are his judgments, not on a basis of research and logical deduction, but for the most part dogmatic expressions accepted on the authority of his
parents, his teachers, his church, and of his social, his economic and other leaders. The public relations counsel must understand the social implications of an individual’s thoughts and actions. (Crystallizing 61-62)

Walter Lippmann took an equally elitist position in his book Public Opinion a year earlier, thus, casting a dismal view on the discursive potential of publics:

The mass of absolutely illiterate, of feeble-minded, grossly neurotic, undernourished and frustrated individuals, is very considerable, much more considerable there is reason to think than we generally suppose.

Thus a wide popular appeal is circulated among persons who are mentally children or barbarians, people whose lives are a morass of entanglements, people whose vitality is exhausted, shut-in people, and people whose experience has comprehended no factor in the problem under discussion.

(48)

Realistically, we can expect that a part of the population will somewhat qualify under Lippmann’s scathing profile of the mass public. McConnell and Huba, for example, show that in any social system, “the vast majority of people involved will be spectators, happily munching their popcorn, observing for a bit and then moving on” (38). As far back as Aristotle, it is reasonable to conclude, that there were those considered too ill-equipped to participate in important public matters. However, both Bernays and Lippmann seem to suggest a philosophical assumption about the nature of the public that marketers have since embraced. Their diagnosis of the public mind invokes the following issue, does marketing epistemology limit IMC from contributing to civil public discourse? Because Bernays insists that publics are more often given to
“expressions of crowd psychology and herd reaction than the result of the calm exercise of judgment,” it can be argued that the role of the marketing communication expert today is to interpret the nature of publics and induce them to accept the will of their organizations (Crystallizing 214). In other words, marketing experts have, at their disposal, the communication means to “engineer” those attitudes that can most benefit the marketer:

In our society, with its myriads of group interest, interest groups, and media, only an engineering approach to the problems of adjustment, information, and persuasion could bring effective results. (Bernays, “Emergence” 297)

Perhaps, Bernays’ defense on the manipulation of publics is a product of the progressive era in which he was writing. An instrumental approach to communication could be more easily justified when progress was the goal:

…Agreement on broad social purposes is essential to progress. Agreement on broad industrial purposes may be equally desirable. Without such agreement, without unified purposes, there can be no progress and the unit must fall. (127)

The philosophy of marketing communication today, however, has not been able to shake the criticism of its early 20th century architects, i.e., to construct a limited democracy where communication elites rule through the manipulation of public opinion. It is easy to read Lippmann’s skepticism of the average citizen as indicative of a distrust for open democracy’s potential to invite uninformed publics to cocreate a society whose public discourse threatens the stable order:
Representative government, either in what is ordinarily called politics, or in industry, cannot be worked successfully, no matter what the basis of election, unless there is an independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions. I attempt, therefore, to argue that the serious acceptance of the principle that personal representation must be supplemented by representation of the unseen facts would alone permit a satisfactory decentralization, and allow us to escape from the intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs. (Lippmann 19)

A closer reading, however, reveals a slight difference in Lippmann’s critique than Bernays’ which opens an opportunity to reframe the deliberative potential of ordinary citizens today. While Bernays’ characterization of the public hints to a kind of pathological condition that afflicts the capacity for publics to effectively engage in deliberative discourses, Lippmann implicates the citizen’s inability to access quality information which is a necessary component of democratic processes. The prospect for citizen participation, though subtle, would seem to be more encouraging in the Age of Information as communication technology promises, although unproved, to provide greater access to public forums and information.

Still, Bernays’ position problematizes the rhetorical power of publics as well as the deliberative potential of citizens. Contrary to Bernays’ argument, the central concern of public discourse in modern society is not that people can never completely know all the facts about public affairs. His point is not unique, but rather echoes Plato’s belief, shown in the Gorgias, that rhetoric was inferior to philosophy, i.e., rhetoric obfuscates
the truth while philosophy discovers it. The issue, in other words, is not whether an authentic public opinion, that is, one that reflects the true beliefs or the uniform sentiment of the public can be ascertained. It is, more likely, whether in a civil economy marketers can move to a dialogical structure of communication where the way in which consumers actually communicate their opinions can affect the direction and quality of public discourse, i.e., be a contributive force in the construction of discourse as something other than a passive observer.

Such a position, though, requires a reframing of the strategic aim of relationship-building and dialogue. For example, as shown in the early work of Schultz et al., IMC claims to be customer-focused. A focus on customer is essential to achieve the strategic aims of dialogue and relationship-building. Marketing communication in the IMC paradigm, however, provides little basis to meet the criteria of dialogic praxis when marketers frame communication as an exclusively rational process. As stated earlier, according to Murray and Ozanne, most market research is derived from social scientific methodologies that focus on explaining and predicting the behavior of consumers. Market researchers seem to believe that the target audience can be known objectively, communicated to efficiently/rationally, and molded socially to meet a marketer’s strategic objectives.

The problem with this is that focus groups and interviews, typical research methods of marketers, can potentially preempt dialogic communication. In other words, the questions asked in the research process are pre-planned and the responses are prefigured, i.e., communication participants are limited in their responses by the type of questions asked. As Hauser shows, survey research, of the kind described here, has been
criticized for producing results that can be “grossly insensitive to the phenomena under investigation, if not outright misleading” (Vernacular 191). By dictating the norms of “dialogic” interaction during the research process, the marketer potentially both risks a severely limited communication perspective of their audience and a marketing discourse that favors the non-rational/emotional. If, as Kavali et al. show, relationship-building emerges from communication participants in dialogue; one has to wonder if the transactional form of relationships, typical of marketing communication, can foster dialogue.

Hence, the claim of Christensen et al., that IMC is “embedded in the grand modern project of controlling nature through reason and objective information,” suggests both an historical feature of marketing communication and a problematic epistemology if the goal of marketing communication is dialogue and long-term relationships (5). In fact, Thomas appropriates the term “epistemopathology” to characterize marketing’s “diseased, sick, and bad knowledge that is mechanically applied to contemporary global market systems in self serving ways” (2).

The critique of marketing’s “epistemopathology” implies that the field has become a kind of mechanical “market-driven professionalism” (Ibid). The dilemma of a market-driven professionalism, considered with what Brown views as the uncertainty of the marketing concept in his book chapter “Postmodernism: The End of Marketing,” is said to lead to a marketer’s failure to communicate dialogically with their audiences, thus, hindering the level to which the discourse could ascend, as in a broader conversation on issues of public importance. This point has some merit if marketers are unwilling or unable to understand the rhetorical dynamics in which public opinion
develops. Dialogue may be limited if its terms are set from an ideological framework where the marketer is the initiator and controller of communication while the consumer retains the role of receiver/audience. Theoretically, the dialogue is frustrated by narrowly defining the audience as mere consumers who behave simply as passive recipients to marketing communication messages. The discourse, then, would seem to focus entirely on the marketing transaction. On the other hand, to encourage a more robust public discourse that integrates marketing communication objectives with those issues brought to bear by a rhetorically capable audience, a discourse based understanding of the way in which public opinion forms provides an opportunity for marketers to both better apprehend the people they are talking to and cocreate a dialogue that reflects the communicative potential of public discourse in a civil society.

The Prospect for Civil Public Discourse and Marketing Communication

As discussed earlier, critical studies often point to marketing communication as a catalyst of consumer culture. There is no shortage of scholarship that depicts post-WW II America as a “consumer society” (Goodwin et al., Rosenblatt, Clarke). Fairclough defines “consumerism” as an “unprecedented level of impingement by the economy on people’s lives” (165). If Fairclough’s description is representative, it is because he offers a reasonable interpretation on the degree of commitment to which some people have freely made the marketplace the locus of meaning in their lives and not, I argue, because the marketplace forces people to adopt an economic worldview as their primary interpretive frame. Certainly, advertisements do not coerce people to buy goods and services that they do not need. However, Fairclough makes an intriguing point by arguing that marketing communication is “able to achieve its most significant qualitative effects:
the constitution of cultural communities” (166). Marketing communication has substantial persuasive force, in part, because of its ubiquity.

Moreover, a common claim is that marketers encourage a consumer worldview by strategically executing a brand-driven discourse aimed at emotional “bonding,” i.e., making an emotional connection with the brand. As evidence, a criticism of advertising is that it seeks to create such a branding experience through the presentation of attention-grabbing imagery that often lacks relevant or logical substance. At the 2008 British Television Advertising Awards, for example, of all the gold medals awarded, “only two contained dialogue, and in one of them, Tide's US ‘talking stain’ spot, the whole point of the ad is that you can't hear what is being said” (Benady). To some scholars, like Harms and Kellner, this advertising reflects a culture where “image plays a more important role than linguistic discourse, for while verbal imagery is discursive, visual imagery is non-discursive, emotional, associative, iconic, and fictive” (“Toward a Critical Theory”).

One way to look at this is that the images marketing communication present supersede reasoned discourse since the viewer must “consume” corporate images rather than deliberate on historically relevant meanings as a foundation for mutual understanding and moral action. In a marketing culture, “I shop therefore I am, is the central leitmotif and identity is constituted by what is owned and consumed” (Lowe et al. 198). Marketing communication, then, is claimed to be at the center of this social phenomenon (Morgan 137). Additionally, marketing communication theory is often criticized for programming communication actions that are inconsistent with democratic goals and processes. At the core of this criticism is a concern for the way marketers communicate in a society marked by its pluralism. As Harms and Kellner point out:
A close examination of the relationship between increasingly concentrated and powerful corporate advertisers and increasingly fragmented and isolated consumers/citizens reveals that advertising's practices and trends contradict democratic ideals and goals. (“Toward a Critical Theory”)

IMC theory posits the tactical use of a single, unitary message from which to engage their publics. A fair question to ask, then, is how a society, that is decidedly diverse, is served by such a strategy? For marketers to better understand the dialogical implications of their relationship with consumers, marketing communication needs to be reframed as part of an ongoing discursive process through which diverse publics contribute to and shape the form and content of rhetoric in the marketplace. A discursive-grounding of marketing communication suggests that marketers are rethinking their traditional assumptions about the role of consumers while discovering their own capacity to better effect a dialogue that coheres with the rhetorical features of civil society. This interpretive shift represents a guideline for dialogic engagement in which marketers and consumers may address the challenge that Christensen et al. point out on IMC’s use of one-voice, one message strategies in a culture that is clearly diverse (7).

Assuming discursive authority rests in the power to manage meanings including, in the marketing sense, “the meaning of goods, the meaning of roles, and the meaning of transactions,” consumers can demonstrate that they too occupy an active rather than passive role in their relations with marketers, i.e., their relationship with marketers is to grow from a civil public discourse (Fitchett 25). Such a relationship means that consumers will push the discourse beyond the marketing concept. Consequently, marketing communication, the public good, politics and social will overlap forming the
basis for civil economy. A civil economy encourages a marketplace that embraces the ability for diverse publics to contribute to discourses on political, social as well as economic issues.

The ground for marketers to forge a civil public discourse exists. However, the prospect for civil public discourse requires marketers to realign their marketing communication practices with those rhetorical processes from which a more ethical discourse might emerge. Citing Greenfield, Lowe et al. recommend a new discourse “related to values, and to view the task of marketing as a moral art” (199). If marketing communication is to be practiced as a moral art, marketers must account for the way in which dialogue can realistically be enacted with its key publics. Although many communication theorists consider dialogue an ideal communication approach, the term is often used in the marketing literature “ubiquitously and with little specificity” (Stoker and Tusinski 160). As Kent and Taylor warn, “dialogue is not a panacea… A dialogic approach cannot force an organization to behave ethically, nor is it even appropriate in some circumstances” (24). John Peters further suggests that “dissemination,” rather than dialogue, is a more realistic representation of human beings in communication. According to Peters, dissemination or “suspended dialogue” recognizes that human communication is more like a “bridge and chasm” that brings people closer to agreement and exposes the disagreement lying in between (qtd. in Stoker and Tusinski 157).

Dialogue is not always possible, then, nor the ideal goal given the specific communication context. In fact, since Grunig and Hunt introduced the routinely taught concept of “two-way symmetrical communication,” a precursor of the notion of dialogue
in marketing communication, many critics have called into question its viability as an
approach to communicating with publics (Stoker and Tusinski 159-160).

In the practice of IMC, it is more sensible to aim for a dialogue that is open to, as Hauser
shows, the rhetorical character of civil society. Such a discourse is shaped by the
rhetorical capabilities of people as active, engaged publics, the existence of multiple
public spheres and a public opinion that realistically portrays the collective reasoning
process of ordinary citizens (Vernacular Voices). To the contrary, dialogue, in the
conventional sense, emphasizes limited participation in the process of communication
and heightened control over the interchange (Stoker and Tusinski 161). This is not to
suggest that dialogue is unattainable in certain conventional marketing communication
settings. In one-to-one communication situations, dialogue may be a reasonable goal
because of the intimate nature of the encounter. However, much of marketing
communication is still directed to mass audiences, e.g., advertising, direct marketing,
sales promotions. A dialogue that reflects the capabilities of broader participation
requires a shift in the way dialogue is conceived.

Dialogue, then, must be reframed to address the particular limitations of
marketing communication practice. In chapter four, I will discuss the notion of a
“dialogized” rhetoric as a more pragmatic alternative to typical marketing dialogue. A
“dialogized” rhetoric answers concerns over the diversity and magnitude of the
marketplace without making dyadic communication a necessary condition for dialogue
(Hauser Vernacular Voices). Relationships, then, are formed as part of an ethical
discourse rather than through simple intersubjective exchanges such as customer
feedback on a website. Furthermore, the relational commitment is one of civil public
discourse grounded in the struggle to build trust and not the tenuous association between marketers and consumers based on, for example, brand loyalty. This is why Fairclough calls for a shift in discursive practice from the *strategic discourse* of marketing communication, where discourse is “oriented to instrumental goals” and “getting results,” to *communicative discourse* which is “oriented to reaching understanding between participants” (164). A communicative discourse addresses the limitations in seminal marketing communication theory.

These limitations, demonstrated in the work of Lippmann and, more so, Bernays, suggest that public opinion can be imposed while public discourse can be manufactured. In other words, professional communicators, because their social science techniques have enabled them to arrive at the right opinion, must work to fit that opinion into the attitudes of the ill-informed masses. Consequently, public discourse will reflect the interests of the knowing elite minority while denying the will-formation capability of its publics. Though Bernays promotes a two-way communication process, his most ardent critics suggest that marketing communication experts are really called to adjust the attitudes of the public to favor the needs of their clients. Therefore, Bernays’ two-way communication merely implies an authorized discourse that directs an audience of passive listeners. The two-way process may consider the attitudes of the subject, but only to more efficiently facilitate the act of engineering the proper action, i.e., the action that the expert sees as most pragmatic to asserting his/her will. The relationship between marketers and their audience, then, is not equal, but rather that of a doctor and his patient. And dialogue is simply hearing what the patient says while making the necessary prescription.
Marketing communication, in this description, does not recognize the rhetorical capabilities of consumers. When marketers adopt a rhetorical framework for marketing communication, they are able to demonstrate that consumers represent, not simply a passive target audience, but, more importantly, an active public formed in the range of rhetorical engagements that respond to relevant public concerns. Whether called consumers, markets, target audiences, stakeholders, or the other myriad of names marketing theorists have given to the buying masses, the notion of “public” recognizes that the people with whom marketers communicate have the rhetorical capacity to actively engage in “evolving opinions that influence how our cultural, social, and political wheels turn” (Hauser 1999, 33). Marketing communication must engage the social will of publics to build goodwill and meet the bottomline.

The social will of publics, in a democratic civil society, is often demonstrated by the least powerful, the seemingly insignificant, and the least heard points of view, i.e., those that Lippmann and Bernays disqualify to be an important part of the process of shaping, influencing, and affecting public opinion. A civil marketplace calls marketers and their publics to be cocreators of public discourse:

As citizens we should see ourselves and other as the co-makers of argument and co-users of evidence whose task it is to explore alternatives in a spirit open to education and persuasion, a spirit that ennobles those who are members of our audience as well as those who are engaged with us in the process of finding solutions. In such a realm, as Thomas Jefferson recognized democracy is safe. (Jamieson, 69)
Fairclough recognizes the need for democratic communication approaches in marketing (Language and Power). His notion of a communicative discourse builds on a theoretical foundation that guides marketers and their publics to share responsibility in the construction of a civil public discourse. The task to bring about communicative discourse, however, requires a closer examination of those communication theories that seek a framework for civil public discourse. For example, Habermas’ work to articulate a viable ethic in deliberative processes demonstrates the power of privileged discourses to create inequalities in the public realm and a communication approach where democratic procedures can overcome these same inequalities. Habermas’ notion of “communicative action” represents the possibility that dialogue in the marketplace can be viable. His theory offers a universal system of public dialogue that grounds discourse in the act of rational/deliberative discussion, thus, creating the conditions for civil, ideal speech. The conditions for ideal speech which include; an “equal opportunity for all to participate, all ideas being open to challenge and discussion, participants being true to themselves, and all having equal power to influence others,” are perhaps, though, too radical an approach for dialogue in the marketplace (Leeper 3). Still, the scope of Habermas’ theory of communicative action contributes to an interpretation of marketing communication in civil society by determining a number of coordinates relevant for the practice of ethical public discourse.
Chapter 3: Deliberation as Public Discourse

The Legitimation Dilemma in the Marketplace

In the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas provides an historical account of the breakdown of civil society. This is a theme reflected in much of the literature that suggests we live in a time of uncivil public discourse. Habermas claims that the problem is symptomatic of a crisis in our social system where the “increased state intervention and the degeneration of civil society into monopolies and trusts led to the commodification of news and information, and accordingly transformed the public sphere into a place of passive consumption rather than active critical participation” (Hill and Montag 5). His examination of public discourse yields a rather unbalanced relationship between the marketplace and ordinary citizens whereby political and market forces have come to dominate the erstwhile communicative realm previously occupied by a critical public.

Habermas points to coercion and domination as the prevailing conditions of the degenerated public sphere which limit and disable democratic participation and lead to communicative inequalities (Dahlberg 123). The notion of inequality indicates a Marxist reading of communication relationships as social differences among interlocutors defined by power and control. Although the idea of power helps frame practical issues in the marketplace such as access and resources, the principal concern in this dissertation does not begin with the assumption that the marketplace cannot function as a communicative arena for democratic discourse. In fact, it can be argued that since the marketplace is constituted by diverse markets, democratic processes of communication will allow
marketers to more effectively engage the plurality of discourses emerging in the marketplace. Habermas’ critical approach, however, does provide a starting point from which to assess the potential for marketers and their publics to negotiate the plurality of concerns, ideas and opinions as they shape a civil public discourse. In this chapter, I will discuss Habermas’ claims concerning the decline of public discourse and the communicative conditions necessary to restore democratic communication.

As pointed out, “Americans are increasingly convinced that our society has lost much of the feeling of community that pervaded life in past generations” (Beem 10). This is a mere symptom of the problem Habermas sees as a critical, societal trend, i.e., people lack a significant public life which signals a loss of interest and trust in those human institutions that provide social meaning and order outside of the marketplace such as politics, education and civic involvement through voluntary organizations, community associations, or social clubs. If this claim is admitted, it follows that the quality of public discourse has been increasingly degraded by what Habermas describes as the “collapse” of the public’s communicative network made up of “rationally debating private citizens” (Structural 247). A reasonable inference is that public opinion, as the product of critical discourse from engaged publics, is diminished. Furthermore, public discourse becomes a form of “quasi-public opinion” where opinions “circulate in a relatively narrow circle skipping the mass of the population between the large political press and, generally those publicist organs” (Ibid).

Ideally, Habermas argues, a public discourse that reflects a healthy civil society is the product of formal deliberative processes found in rational-critical debate where opinions are not “institutionally authorized” (Ibid). A focus of concern here is how to
confront those sources of uncivil public discourse in marketing theory and practice. For example, what responsibility do marketers and consumers share toward constructing a civil public discourse? Moreover, how can marketing communication contribute to a civil public discourse? Marketing communication is a form of linguistic phenomena. As such, because of language’s capacity to forge mutual understanding and community, marketing communication, that proves to be a trustworthy voice with consumers, is more likely to create the intersubjective bonds needed for a civil public discourse. Habermas, thus, posits the theory of communicative action as the linguistic means to restore a civil public discourse since it “presupposes language as the medium for a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to a world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested” (Communicative Action vol. 1 99).

The key to Habermas’ argument is the notion that language is inherently rational and contains norms to “criticize domination and oppression and a force that could ground and promote societal democratization” (Kellner 10). To countervail claims that marketing communication dominates public discourse, marketing communication theory can operationalize Habermas’ “linguistic turn,” or more precisely, his discursive turn by emphasizing a marketer’s willingness to acknowledge consumers as “society’s dynamic participants and judges” (Hauser, Vernacular 33). The turn toward this alternative communicative praxis, whose function is discursive and aim is civil, may help marketers to understand how consumers develop and express opinions and, consequently, contribute to public discourse.
In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas describes the problem of public discourse as a dilemma of “legitimation” that is both unavoidable in modern capitalist societies, and a threat to fundamental democratic principles. Broadly defined, legitimation is concerned with the “way a government or social system attempts to justify its existence and power” (Reyes, “Habermas’ Crisis”). At issue is society’s ability to sustain democratic spheres of communication, i.e., autonomous communication within economy, society, and the polity. Habermas makes discourse the basis for democratic communication. Discourse, then, proceeds from communication processes that allow everyday people to reclaim a degree of self-regulation in politics, economy, and community. Following Habermas’ logic, a “democratic discourse” represents the prospect of reforming society to democratic legitimacy by developing the autonomy of participants through their discursive reasoning skills (Warren 172). Any critical attempt to understand how communication can be improved at a public-level should focus on those discursive processes and conditions that characterize the way people actually develop and express their opinions. A return to democratic legitimacy begins with the inherent human capacity for a person to communicate in a productive manner:

> Language is characterized as a universal medium (along with work and domination) in which the social life of the human species unfolds.

(McCarthy xiii in *Legitimation*)

Habermas contrasts democratic legitimacy with “legitimation crisis,” i.e., a lack of control that threatens communicative autonomy and, therefore, the degree to which political, economic and social institutions can maintain their credibility and validate their authority. In other words, as people lose trust in the government, or economy, society
risks a communication breakdown that may threaten the entire socio-economic order. This is a condition that comes to mind recently in a few U.S. based industrial sectors which have affected markets on a global scale. Significant downturns in car manufacturing, banking, mortgage lending and retail have caused some investors to lose faith in the ability for a number of American corporations, once perceived as anchors of the economy, to sustain profitability. Much of the discourse, originating in mass media, depicted these events as near crises for American consumers.

Technical explanations aside, the concept of legitimation in this dissertation works coherently as a principle of discourse. For example, because of the emphasis on communicative autonomy, members of society are more likely to resolve crises when they can engage discursively with others and make critical judgments that affect public talk and decision-making in meaningful ways. Conversely, according to Habermas, a society is in crisis when ordinary citizens do not adequately “engage in critical examination of self and others, engage in reasoning processes, and arrive at judgments they can defend in argument” (Warren 172). These conditions for healthy discourse enable the integrative function of communication to maintain a sense of civil order in society. A legitimation crisis in the marketplace, then, suggests that public discourse is degraded as marketers disengage with their publics, thus, subjugating their capacity to develop and express genuine opinion in meaningful ways.

In theory, a civil marketing discourse will work to meet communication objectives and integrate those interests and concerns articulated by a marketer’s publics. In other words, the public’s opinion becomes a necessary and integrative component for the formation of marketing communication and the maintenance of a civil economy. A
discourse-centered understanding of public opinion, or “critical publicity,” is an essential part of the democratization of discourse. Habermas makes deliberation and reason the historical grounds of public opinion in a well-functioning democratic system:

…Public opinion in its turn needed the publicity of parliamentary deliberations to keep itself informed: “Among a people who have been long accustomed to public assemblies, the general feeling will be raised to a higher tone—sound opinion will be more common…A habit of reasoning and discussion will penetrate all classes of society.” (Structural 100)

The notion of publicity in the marketplace suggests that the public is capable of engaging marketers in their efforts to be a civil institution by cocreating a civil public discourse. What often emerges as an important component in the rhetorical marketplace is a discursive sphere for competing discourses that shape the meaning and efficacy of a participant’s rhetoric. In this way, the marketplace can be a discursive space for conflicting arguments. The concept of contested public space is the practical exercise of democratic legitimacy. It is the product of those rhetorical acts of people who publicly challenge the actions of other rhetors through, in Habermas’s system, formal deliberative discourse:

Democratic legitimacy, for Habermas, is measured not just in terms of law being enacted by a majority, but also in terms of the discursive quality of the full processes of deliberation leading up to such a result. Discursively healthy processes, from the most diffuse and informal to the most structured and formal, are what maintain a sense of validity and solidarity among a constitutional community. (White 10)
This is the central concern of Habermas’ work, for as McCarthy states in his introduction to *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas seeks a theory of communicative competence that works toward "the self-emancipation of man from the constraints of unnecessary domination in all its forms" (xviii). Habermas illustrates that an optimal functioning civil society depends on a robust public discourse between citizens, the marketplace, and the state. The legitimacy of those political, social, and civil organizations, required to bring meaning and order, depend on the capacity of the individual to act with a degree of communicative autonomy.

Habermas develops a deliberative framework to address concerns emerging from social and political legitimation. His vision of civil society is grounded in a discourse characterized by an active citizenship which “nurtures people-centered work and fosters public spaces that engage a significant minority of citizens in deliberative processes committed to the common weal” (Welton 20). Habermas’ discursive democracy helps marketing communication theory better articulate the opportunities and limitations of dialogue by locating it in a practical discourse that requires the participation of an active public rather than a conventional dialogue where a strategic marketing communication seeks the assent of target audiences. According to Habermas, dialogue, in the strategic sense, cannot achieve legitimacy since it most often lacks the conditions of “ideal speech” such as symmetry and reciprocity. Stoker and Tusinski support this claim by arguing that dialogue, grounded in strategy, can be both utopian and unrealistic for organizations since it demands that the organization capitulate its goals and objectives (159). In other words, dialogue, in the conventional sense, poses a communication dilemma for marketers when it becomes either too strategic and undermines reciprocal
relations, or too accommodating and threatens their ability to survive in a competitive marketplace. Habermas distinguishes deliberative discourse from strategic discourses by its attention to a process of reasoned, discussion that is required of any speaker who desires to participate. His notion of communicative action, then, is an ideal discourse that produces a reasoned/critical discussion guided by rational argumentative procedures defined as “communicative rationality” (*Communicative Action vol. 1*).

Habermas conceives of society in a way that makes rational discourse the proper basis for public discourse. As such, society is held in tension between the communicative realm of the “lifeworld” and those formal institutions of state and economy called “systems” (*Communicative Action vol. 2*). The unwarranted intrusion of state and economic “systems” into society, Habermas claims, leads to the “colonization of the lifeworld” (*Communicative Action vol. 1*). In other words, without the essential input that a critical public opinion provides, the interests of economy and state become “uncoupled” from the interests of the public. The colonization may “so dominate the lifeworld as to diminish the sense of efficacy of discussants and thereby incapacitate the operation of reflexion [sic] in the lifeworld” (Staats 589). However, as Habermas shows, “language and communication are a central feature of the human lifeworld that can resist the systemic imperatives of money and power which undermine communicative structures” (Kellner 11).

The goal of a deliberative discourse, in part, would be to “erect a democratic dam against the colonizing encroachment of system imperatives on areas of the lifeworld” (Calhoun, 444). Yet, as Habermas argues, the potential to resist colonization exists only to the “degree that its concerns can be articulated in ways that accord with the
universalist normative bent of communicative rationality” (White 9). The concept of “communicative rationality” demonstrates Habermas’ attempt to develop a communication practice grounded in the “rational potential implicit in cultural modernity” (White 8). The central concern of “communicative rationality” is the question of how language is inclined to coordinate action in a consensual, or cooperative way as opposed to a forced, or manipulated one (Warnke 120). This is perhaps the appeal of Habermas’ theory for those who seek universal grounds for discourse in that human rationality functions as a common (universal) basis for moral judgment and decision-making. Most importantly, it is a rationality realized in discourse and, as such, reflects a communicative basis to explain the autonomy of the human being as she seeks to participate in the shaping of her world in a meaningful way:

When communication is revealed as having its own rationality, and where it can be shown to be the primary and appropriate method of coordinating human activity within particular spheres of life, incursion into those spheres by inappropriate forms of coordination can be resisted. (Blaug 28)

By locating rationality in discourse, Habermas calls attention to the deliberative capabilities of a people who, through a procedure of critical discussion, counteract the alleged “manipulation of public opinion by dominating elites and institutions in service of their individual interests rather than in furtherance of public good” (Staats 586). For Habermas, the return to democratic legitimacy, then, is grounded in the discursive exercise of those who commit to a public process of reasoned, critical discussion. Historically, this was the realization of the democratic “public sphere” whose identity was distinguished by its communicative function and whose purpose was to regulate
public authorities by engaging them in “a debate over the general rules governing
relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange
and social labor” (Habermas, “Further” 27).

Habermas’ re-creation of the public sphere, applied to marketing communication
today, projects a marketplace shaped by discursive practices that preserve the character of
critical public discussions once found in those spaces where people gathered to express
their opinions on relevant public matters. In the marketplace, this means that companies
develop an awareness for those spaces, physical and virtual, as their stakeholders seek to
engage marketers and contribute their ideas, concerns, and opinions to the ongoing public
discussion. Yet, according to Habermas, such engagement would require a formal
deliberative process that guarantees the proper ethical grounds for discourse. Justified
from Habermas’ perspective, this rationality for dialogic communication confronts
communication crises caused by marketplace domination in the public sphere.

**Deliberation in the Marketplace**

Habermas argues that “crises arise when the structure of a social system allows
fewer possibilities for problem solving than are necessary to the continued existence of
the system” (*Legitimation* 2). If we are to accept the claims advanced by Habermas’
portrayal of a legitimation crisis in capitalist societies, then, one possible implication is
that the norms of public discourse have so drastically changed that ordinary people do not
meaningfully communicate their opinions, or their opinions do not matter in any
meaningful way. In other words, the contribution that people make toward the production
of public discourse is often minimized by those who possess the power and influence to
control the means and forums of public communication. In marketplace terms, Habermas
frames the problem as the “lifeworld” of people confronting the “encroaching instrumental logic of markets” (44). At its worst, the resulting diminution of participants along with the narrowing of issues and the limiting of viewpoints impedes the advancement of deliberative democracy. Citizenship is reduced to a short menu of opportunities for involvement in public life, mainly through voting, while people become less integrated into key opinion-forming processes, i.e., as members of an active public.

To consider the efficacy of Habermas’ communication theory in the marketplace, without abandoning a marketer’s business objectives, it is first necessary to consider whether a formal deliberative communication process can be a realistic marketing communication framework that coheres with the way people develop and express their opinions.

Because Habermas is working within the tradition of the Frankfurt School, which conceives of the social, political, and economic in terms of power differences, his ideal democracy is realized as a process of deliberation whereby people freely engage in critical discourse that holds institutional authority in check, e.g., a public discussion on a corporation’s actions. Habermas’ discursive democracy recalls the democratic traditions of Tocqueville and Dewey, for example, which presume responsibility to the community in which one lives and the potential to engage in effective discourse on matters of public interest. The notion of community is important to the deliberative dimensions of discourse because it represents the possibility that one’s views become more “multi-dimensional and fuller by engagement with perspectives of others and with insights and knowledge with which one had not previously been acquainted” (Boyte 4). Can deliberative processes bring about a more civil community and positively affect discourse? According to Boyte, deliberation emphasizes “processes through which
citizens come to understand values like public discussion, civility, and a commitment to the common good” (3). Habermas’ theory of communicative action and its related moral framework, discourse ethics, Boyte contends, demonstrates the possibility that public deliberation can exist in a political, economic environment that threatens to undercut it (6). In other words, viable communities emerge from processes of critical discourse. This claim makes sense when the idea of discourse is conceived of as a linguistic construction. Language structures, for example, are said to create community and because language is not value-neutral, the bonds between people are moral claims (Christians 185).

Habermas’ concept of the democratic community seems to draw, then, from the “idea of a suitably interpreted deliberative politics” (Baynes 215). He is clear, however, to point out that the qualities of a “substantive democracy” are a byproduct of deliberation, hence, processes of political will-formation require the “genuine participation” of its citizens (Legitimation Crisis 36). Quoting B. Manin in Further Reflections on the Public Sphere, Habermas shows that deliberation provides the discursive means by which a collection of individuals become a critical public and restore the communicative agency necessary for democratic communication:

    The source of legitimacy is not the predetermined will of individuals, but rather the process of its formation, that is, deliberation itself…A legitimate decision does not represent the will of all, but is one that results from the deliberation of all. It is the process by which everyone’s will is formed that confers its legitimacy on the outcome. (446)

Habermas, consequently, offers two important concepts that are useful to an understanding of deliberation and marketing communication; participation, as a rational
communicative process and the notion of a community of speakers whose collective identity is transformed by reasoned discourse. His deliberative discourse reflects an ethical discursive praxis by providing normative ground for a marketing communication defined by participation, critical thinking and reasoned judgment that yield considered public opinion.

The challenge to applying Habermas’ framework to marketing communication, however, is the claim that marketers fail to achieve substantive dialogue. Marketing’s critics argue that those mechanisms of marketing communication, e.g., advertising, direct marketing, sales promotions, rely mostly on monological communication tactics. The counterargument can be made, however, that marketing communication actually demonstrates the possibility of a dialogic-model of communication when marketers focus on the discursive exchanges with its publics. Such a model encourages the marketer to reconceive consumers as publics who can shape the agenda of marketing communication by attending to ideas, concerns and issues as they emerge in discourse. The implication is that marketers shift from instrumental thinking, where the “relation of a solitary subject to something in the objective world” can be manipulated, to a communicative perspective which focuses on “the intersubjective relation that speaking and acting subjects take up when they come to an understanding with one another about something” (Habermas, *Communicative Action* vol. 1 392). Communicative action, as a marketing communication dialogue, would emphasize mutual cooperation that leads to consensus, i.e., an attempt by communicators to co-construct the terms and conditions from which marketing decisions can be made and actions taken:
For Habermas’ understanding of communication is rooted fundamentally in its role in coordinating action through agreements deemed legitimate. The pressure for decision in the context of social action generates constraints to strive toward consensus. (Coles 35)

Discourse leading to consensus reflects Habermas’ vision of an “ideal communication community” in that “given enough time, given interlocutors of goodwill, and given a constraint-free environment, everyone would come to the same conclusion as we have” (Chambers, “Discourse and Democratic” 233). Habermas’ discourse ethics sets a challenging goal for dialogic modes of communication because consensus is always the predetermined aim of interaction. However, a cooperative procedure that frames discussion and dialogue is not entirely counterintuitive to marketing communication processes. One-to-one marketing communication tactics that invite a critical appraisal of the company, or negotiations with members of a public, at a local level, are reasonable communication contexts for consensus-oriented dialogue. Still, consensus works most effectively in small groups. And because marketing communication seeks to be effective on a global scale, it must employ the tools of mass media. Does this mean Habermas’ notion of dialogue has no application to marketing communication? Habermas’ deliberative model offers an opportunity for enhanced understanding of the discursive process for marketers within the limitations of a highly complex theory of social and political discourse. As such, ethics is viewed as a fundamental concern of discursive engagement.

Habermas shows that ethical discourse is forged as rhetors confront questions that demand rational action leading to “justified decisions about the pursuit of collective goals
and the normative regulation of life in common” (Habermas, *Between 158*). The dialogic enterprise of a deliberative discourse, then, seeks ethical ground from which appropriate decisions can be made. Ethical dialogue happens through the deliberative processes by which people “serve to specify and weigh collective goals as well as to construct and select programs and strategies suitable for achieving these goals” (161). A civil public discourse in the marketplace, for Habermas, would require that consumers engage in a process of deliberation to arrive at an informed, reflective public opinion. It is through the act of deliberative discourse, then, that opinions of the individual consumer become the common will and concern of an active public of citizens:

Through discursive interaction on various issues from who we are? to the best means of securing deficit reduction, citizens become more informed about the issues; they become more aware of what others think and feel, they reevaluate their positions in light of criticism and argument.

(Chambers, “Discourse and Democratic” 238)

Although the aim of this discourse is the formation of a public opinion grounded in a community of deliberating speakers, Habermas limits it to the use of reason leading to common agreement, i.e., a universalizable principle of discourse:

The discursively formed will may be called “rational” because the formal properties of discourse and of the deliberative situation sufficiently guarantee that a consensus can arise only through appropriately interpreted, generalizable interests by which I mean needs that can be communicatively shared. (Habermas, *Legitimation 108*)
Though the appeal to reason as a basis for ethical discourse has been the source of scholarly controversy, reason itself is not incongruous to the way marketers work to communicate with their publics. Theoretically, reason, as a basis for discursive engagement, recognizes that human beings are communicative actors primarily interested in mutual understanding (Ibid). And, communicative processes that reach understanding have a rational basis (Habermas, *Communicative Action vol. 1* 287). Deliberation encourages people to think, reflect, and utilize rational means by which to negotiate historically-appropriate, shared meanings that shape their lifeworld. In the course of deliberation “people find ratification of identities, they reinforce or discover memberships and meaningful attachments to groups larger than the groups that bear their primary solidarities” (Mayhew 5). Marketers, however, more consistently utilize rational methods to manage communication with their publics rather than engage them in rational processes of communication.

Prominent market research guru Clotaire Rapaille downplays the use of such methods claiming “people respond with their cerebral cortexes, the part of the brain that controls intelligence, rather than emotion or instinct. Their answers are the product of deliberation. In most cases, however, they aren't saying what they feel” (44). Rapaille’s use of deliberation here emphasizes a physiological rather than rational critical role in human communication. Consequently, dialogue with consumers is, at best, a means “either limiting or enabling them in the pursuit of their ends” (Chambers, “Discourse” 239). On the other hand, Habermas’ discourse ethics encourages “communicative actors” to “view their dialogue partners as ends in themselves: as autonomous agents whose capacity for rational judgment must be respected” (Ibid). In principle, Habermas’
discourse ethics suggests that if the marketplace is to enact civil public discourse, interactions are to be guided by formal rules of rational-critical deliberation.

Still, the value of Habermasian deliberation in the marketplace is its emphasis on a principle of public opinion analogous to the historical interpretation of critical publicity. As suggested earlier, Habermas views publicity as the legitimate exercise of public opinion without which a democratic public discourse cannot be sustained:

Publicity was, according to its very idea, a principle of democracy not because anyone could in principle announce, with equal opportunity, his personal inclinations, wishes and convictions—opinions; it could only be realized in the measure that these personal opinions could evolve through the rational-critical debate of a public into public opinions. (Structural 219).

The potential for the marketplace to become a space for civil public discourse depends, Habermas might suggest, on the enactment of reasoned discussion as a basis for marketing communication. Communication here means “not merely sharing what people already think or know, but also a process of potential transformation in which reason is advanced by debate itself” (Calhoun 29). In those discursive spaces of the marketplace, public opinion would not be reduced to market research data, but, as Habermas would have it, publicity as a “source of reasoned, progressive consensus formation rather than an occasion for the manipulation of popular opinion” (Calhoun 28).

Habermas’ deliberative discourse represents the possibility that public opinion can be the product of reasoned discussion. His description of a “colonized” public sphere suggests that public opinion has become so distorted, in part by commercial interests, that
it is nearly impossible to ascertain the degree to which everyday people affect public
issues other than in some kind of plebiscitary role. Citing the work of Mills, Habermas
sets the conditions by which individual opinions cease to have communicative impact on
the formation of public opinion including: (1) far fewer people express opinions than
receive them; (2) communications make it difficult or impossible for the individual to
answer back effectively; (3) the realization of opinion in action is controlled by
authorities who organize and control the channels for such action and (4) the mass of the
public is not autonomous from institutions, but rather agents from these institutions
penetrate the mass (Structural 249). A marketplace functioning from a deliberative
framework, on the other hand, seeks critical discussion with consumers as a way to arrive
at legitimate public opinion:

According to the deliberative model of democracy, the legitimation
process must pass through a public sphere that has the capacity to foster
considered public opinions. (Habermas, “Political Communication” 418)

It can be argued that considered public opinion, then, is the converse of the
manipulated, non-critical mass opinion outlined above. Using Mills’ typology of public
opinion, Habermas demonstrates the standard by which mere opinion constitutes
considered public opinion including: (1) as many people express opinions as receive
them; (2) communications are such that there is a chance to immediately and effectively
answer back; (3) opinion formed by such discussion finds an outlet in effective action
against the system of authority, and (4) authoritative institutions do not penetrate the
public (Structural 249). More precisely, considered public opinion calls upon the
deliberative qualities of thinking and speaking in discourse. In the context of political
action, Habermas makes considered public opinion the model of deliberative will formation:

For responsive voters, who engage in everyday political talk, read newspapers, watch television, and do or do not participate in elections, considered public opinions likewise present plausible alternatives for what counts as a reasonable position on public issues. It is the formal vote and the actual opinion and will formation of individual voters that together connect the peripheral flows of political communication in civil society and the public sphere with the deliberative decision making… (Habermas, “Political Communication” 418)

What Habermas offers, in this blueprint for discursive democracy, is a conception of discourse whose character is shaped by the deliberations of its members and the network of associations that emerge as they interact with one another. Echoing the normative basis for civil society in Tocqueville and Dewey’s notion of the “Great Community,” Habermas contends that the “core of civil society comprises a network of associations that institutionalizes problem-solving discourses on questions of general interest inside the framework of organized public spheres” (Between 367). Habermas, thus, cultivates an interpretation of the marketplace grounded in civil society. The marketplace occupies a key discursive position in civil society as the site for the emergence of multiple public spheres. To some, this claim may seem questionable since Habermas repeatedly argues that the public sphere, including the communicative forums in the marketplace, are “dominated by mass media and large agencies, observed by
market and opinion research, and inundated by the public relations work, propaganda and advertising of political parties and groups” (Ibid).

However, “opinion-forming associations” of civil society permit citizens to acquire “influence in the public sphere” and, thus, contribute to public discourse through their opinions (*Between 373 and “Further Reflections” 454*). A civil public discourse is effected through participation in those “voluntary unions” constituted by “churches, cultural associations, and academies to independent media, sport and leisure clubs, debating societies, groups of concerned citizens, and grass-roots petitioning drives all the way to occupational associations, political parties, labor unions, and alternative institutions” (453-454).

The discursive function of the marketplace, in part, is to utilize marketing communication to engage civil society when issues bear upon the public’s interest. Deliberative communication practices are not out of the question as a guideline for problem-solving and action since opportunities for critical discussion often emerge as a public constitutes itself through opinion. Opinion-forming associations, thus, exemplify a practical way in which those actors of civil society work at the “periphery of established institutions” and “develop and promote ideas that then make their way through the media…transforming the public agenda and publicly available knowledge” (Mayhew 145). As Mayhew points out, the success of these everyday people, Habermas shows, rests on “successful argument” which, in its traditional application, is the basis of deliberative discourse (145). Critical public discourse redeems the value of a democratic civil society through the influence its members have on public decision-making processes since “influence transformed into communicative power legitimates political decisions”
(Habermas, *Between* 371). The power to legitimate decisions in the public sphere, whether they address political, economic, or social issues, exemplifies Habermas’ ideal discursive practice. As a model of deliberation in the marketplace, it ties civil public discourse to a process of rational, critical discussion among a community of rhetors who may speak on their own behalf, or through those opinion-forming associations that constitute civil society. However, these particular conditions for discourse are often challenged on several grounds including; the exclusivity of the public sphere, the principle of universal rationality as a basis for discourse, and the emphasis on structural proceduralism for public decision-making with an aim toward consensus. The critique of Habermas, therefore, suggests a possible gap between his theoretical criteria for deliberation and its plausibility as a practical communication model in the marketplace.

**The Limitations of Deliberation**

Habermas makes clear the philosophical aim of deliberation in the marketplace. However, some critics of deliberative democracy question whether the theory is precise enough when identifying exact participants, i.e., who deliberates? The notion of everyone deliberating is impractical, yet limiting participation, as the ideal bourgeois public sphere suggests, makes it potentially elitist. (Bohman 24). Nancy Fraser, for example, contends that Habermas’ public sphere loses integrity by the “absence of subordinate groups, including women and lower classes” (Butsch 4). In her essay, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Fraser scrutinizes the notion of a “single, comprehensive public sphere” (117). Examining the discursive character of “stratified societies,” which appears to characterize American society, Fraser asserts that full participation in public debate and deliberation is not possible within an overarching public sphere because of its tendency to “operate to
the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of subordinates…members of subordinated groups would have no arenas for deliberation among themselves about their needs, objectives and strategies” (122-123). By his own admission, thirty years after writing *Structural Transformation*, Habermas admitted that he “underestimated” the significance of non-bourgeois and oppositional public spheres and that the idealized bourgeois public sphere is inconsistent with the plebeian nature of a contemporary public sphere (“Further Reflections” 430).

However, other Habermas critics have pointed out that “working class, plebeian, and women's public spheres developed alongside of the bourgeois public sphere to represent voices and interests excluded in this forum” (Kellner 7). In other words, perceived structural inequalities, in a singular public sphere, might be addressed by widening the space for “discursive contestation” (Fraser 124). As Kellner points out, “rather than conceiving of one liberal or democratic public sphere, it is more productive to theorize a multiplicity of public spheres, sometimes overlapping but also conflicting” (7-8). To some degree, Habermas re-figures the public sphere, in his later works, along these terms, i.e., as an autonomous civil society “coupled with the core private spheres of the lifeworld” (*Between* 367). The openness and diversity that are the hallmark of expanded discursive spaces are, in part, realized by “voluntary associations that intervene in the formation of public opinion, push topics of general interest, and act as advocates for neglected issues and underrepresented groups” (368). Habermas, thus, recognizes those conditions that link the marketplace to civil society and enable it to function as a site for public spheres, for example, through civil associations, diverse markets and issues-driven public opinion.
Still, Fraser pushes the issue with an important question. Given the presence of a more egalitarian public sphere, that is, one that is culturally diverse and void of structural inequalities, is a single, comprehensive public sphere still preferable to a multiplicity of publics (125)? Fraser challenges Habermas’ critics to look deeper at the implications of an idealized public sphere and his communication theory that prescribes it. Two immediate concerns are apparent. First, can discourse be grounded in egalitarian institutional settings, i.e., free of the conditions that foster power differences, social inequalities, and privileged forms of speech? And, second, can an egalitarian discourse be constructed regardless of the institutional setting? Fraser argues that because public spheres exist in culturally-specific institutional settings, e.g., various publications and social geographies, discourse would risk being filtered and altered through a “culturally specific rhetorical lens” (126). Consequently, not all “expressive modes” of discourse could be accommodated (Ibid). This is an issue that applies equally to the marketplace as a particular “institutional setting.” Can the marketplace adequately address concerns that the discourse will privilege corporate needs and objectives to the exclusion of certain social and political concerns and points of view?

Fraser’s argument is coherent if one accepts the claim that a democratic sphere of discourse can never be “equally hospitable to any possible form of cultural expression” (Ibid). However, Habermas never makes class, race, or gender, for example, a necessary condition of the public sphere or democratic discourse. Arguably, a democratic sphere of discourse transcends cultural constraints immanent to institutional settings through the act of rational, critical deliberation. Democracy, as in the formation of a democratic public sphere, and discursive reasoning are, thus, “contingent upon one another and
developmentally linked” (Warren 172). The result is a kind of “self-transformation” in the identity of the communication participant in that “democratic discourse develops the autonomy of participants, that is, their capacities to engage in critical examination of self and others” (Ibid). And, when marketers see their role in the marketplace as responsive and accountable to the network of associations that comprise the reticulate public sphere, the issues that constitute the public interest are more likely to broaden the scope of discourse. Yet, Fraser shows concern that the participant, in the single public sphere, would not be able to “speak one’s own voice” and thereby simultaneously “construct and express one’s cultural identity” (126).

Habermas, however, views identity as a decentering of the self toward a common discursive process, i.e., distancing self-identity from the discursive circumstances in which one finds him/herself (Warren 172-173). This, perhaps, suggest a reasonable ethos for the practice of marketing communication as marketers open themselves to the way in which the discourse of publics may potentially change the way they communicate with them. By doing so, marketing communication responds to the particular that is inherent to the interaction with publics as they form. Although Habermas shows that deliberative processes, when following a rational procedure, lead communication participants to arrive at reasoned public opinion, the notion of reason, as a universal framework for public judgment, has long been contested. It is argued, then, that a universal approach to discourse “is not feasible and that different people, adhering to the same ethical values, will reach different conclusions” (Leeper 6).

Most often, the critique of reason has been a suspicion of Enlightenment bias that presumes reason will have “unique ascendancy over other forms of guidance”
(Guilderson 429). The issue is relevant to the extent that marketers, as organizational rhetors, are expected today to reflect the diversity of their community. If, then, they are to engage in reasoned discussion with diverse publics; they are expected to know their needs, interests and values. In the marketplace, meeting the needs and concerns of publics is at the heart of the marketing concept and is still taken for granted as essential to the long-term ability for marketers to build relationships (Underwood & Ozanne 212).

Can marketing communication be conceived of as an “ideal speech situation” in which the conditions of communication are equal and distortion-free? The marketplace will be hard-pressed to achieve the degree of communicative understanding that Habermas idealizes in his discourse ethics, i.e., marketplace communication between marketers and consumers may not be able to fully capitulate private interests as an ethical condition for public discourse. Realistically though, it is the self-interested speaker that drives discourse. Marketers and consumers engage one another ultimately because each are compelled to speak to their interests. The notion of the marketing concept, in fact, reflects the motivation for marketers to frame their messages in such a way as to satisfy consumer interests and needs. Moreover, it can be argued that the notion of communication inequality in the marketer/consumer relationship is exaggerated. If the marketer’s success depends on satisfaction of consumer needs, as the marketing concept suggests, the consumer wields a great deal of power simply by exercising his/her freedom to deal only with the marketer who listens and responds best.

Yet, because Habermas’ discourse ethics stipulates a formal communication procedure over self-interest, his notion of deliberation is widely called into question as its regulative (ethical) aim is consensus (Wiklund 251). Rehg characterizes the problem of
consensual agreement as an impossible constraint on public discourse where some interlocutors may not be so reasonable and others may lack “either the capacity or good will for dialogue” (410). Given the specific prerequisites of discursive engagement in Habermas’ system, i.e., when “all participants in a communicative act have an equal opportunity to engage in dialogue that is unconstrained by authority or tradition,” one has to ask if consensual agreement could ever be achieved in any public arena other than the most intimate of settings (Underwood and Ozanne 211). Scrutinizing the possibility of consensus in deliberative practice, Rehg suggests that “it begins to look as though no such discourse is possible beyond small groups, working on relatively simple problems” (408).

Once more, the question of who gets to deliberate must be asked when considering the size and the diverse nature of the marketplace. One possible answer may be to restrict deliberation to only those marketing communication activities that utilize interpersonal communication. Marketers might, then, be able to secure the kind of symmetry Habermas believes will lead to consensus. Marketing communication, particularly public relations, often calls for the kind of symmetrical relationship that Habermas has in mind. In reality, however, is consensus a practical communication objective if marketers appeal to the differences and not the universalities in their markets? The question is even more relevant given the global environment in which marketing communication takes place today:

If you have a good eye for global populations, national race and ethnicity concentrations, and consumer-market indices, you could wake up tomorrow and say something like, "I love the smell of diversity in the morning. (Muse 8)
Habermas’ discourse ethics applied, however, would seem to make diversity detrimental to the ability of marketers to deliberate with their publics. Furthermore, Stoker and Tusinski argue that consensus in the marketplace puts an undue burden on marketers and their publics which ultimately leads to “inequity in the environment and exclusion from the dialogue” (164).

Perhaps the most consistent critique on Habermas’ notion of deliberation, with its emphasis on human understanding and consensus, is an inability to demonstrate precisely how it would work given the pluralistic nature of society. As Mayhew points out, Habermas fails to provide adequate specification of what would now, in our age, provide for communication that could qualify as discourse…” (144). Because publics coalesce around particular concerns, needs and interests, it is more realistic to envision, not a single public sphere shaped by universal norms of discourse, but rather a “series of diverse publics…created through a turbulent, provisional, and open-ended process of struggle, change, and challenge” (Boyte 8). Realistically, imagining a civil public sphere would require admitting the multiplicity of political and economic interests that constitute democratic society, so “while it is possible to enhance and promote deliberative venues throughout civil society, it is not at all clear that the broad unregulated public sphere can be deliberative (Chambers, “Rhetoric, Public Opinion” 1). In most public settings, deliberation would not yield a single truth, nor consensus, but rather many truths which reflect “the multiplicity of experiences and stories that bring diverse groups into politics” (Boyte 9).

An initial step toward conceiving of a civil space in the marketplace, for the kind of democratic discourse that deliberation aims to produce, would be to recognize the protean nature of the existing public sphere. Consequently, the marketplace is thought to be a plurality of spheres whose totality is “formed by the communicative interaction of all
groups, even nominally dominant and subaltern” (Hill and Montag 3-4). This picture of the marketplace demonstrates the capacity to preserve the normative strength of Habermas’ discourse ethics because communication in the variety of these public settings would require the kind of critical distance necessary to generate reasoned judgment. It is possible to maintain Habermas’ universalizable ethic on decentering one’s private interests from the discursive process while arguing from the particular if one admits that the act of decentering is already “presupposed in communication and that, as interdependent social beings, we are obligated to struggle to empathize with those who are different from us” (Endres, “Habermas and Critical Thinking”).

The emphasis on formal communication, methodical rationality and the mandate for consensus that characterize Habermas’ theory of communicative action, however, appears at odds to the aim of current marketing communication praxis. It is doubtful that dialogue in the conventional sense could sustain the conditions of formal deliberative politics. Still, the orientation toward dialogue that is crucial in deliberative processes should not be abandoned. Civil public discourse seems attainable when marketers “work with others who they may not at all like or with whom they may have sharp disagreements. In the process, citizens also develop the skills and knowledge seriously to address public issues, to become co-creators of history” (Boyte 15). Habermas provides the theoretical starting point from which to conceive of a public space for civil discourse between marketers and their publics. Yet, formal deliberation is not always a practicable tool for cultivating ethical discursive ground in a fragmented, diverse marketplace. The limitations of Habermas’ theory of communicative action, applied to the marketplace, can be addressed, however, when conceiving of the public sphere, not as an overarching
arena for rational discourse, but rather comprised of many communicative spaces which invite opportunities to engage diverse publics through both formal and informal rhetorical modes of discourse. A rhetorical interpretation, thus, advances the notion of the marketplace as a legitimate space for civil public discourse.
Chapter 4: The Dialogizing of Discourses in the Marketplace

The Need for Democratic Communication

The work of Habermas is useful when examining the claim that we live in a time of uncivil public discourse. His notion of deliberation, constituted by a systematic process of rational, critical debate, opens an opportunity, in theory, for marketers to re-think dialogic engagement with their publics. For example, Habermas’ emphasis on opinion-forming associations focus a marketer’s attention on the discursive processes through which ordinary people might organize and deliberate in civil society (“Further Reflections”). Habermas makes marketers aware of the importance of discourse to create a moral community in which both marketers and their publics occupy a key role in creating the kind of society in which they want to live and do business. Marketing communication, however, is challenged, in practice, to adopt the structured, rational proceduralism prescribed by Habermas. For example, in the everyday marketplace, the diverse character of publics, along with the contingent nature in which discourses are expressed, do not easily cohere with the universalizable public sphere as a model for marketing communication. And, though, we can recognize from Habermas the efficacy of grounding marketing communication in discursive practices, his “turn to discourse” still hinges on of a set of procedures for dialogic engagement (Moon 143).

The application of Habermasian theory to marketing communication, then, is arguably frustrated by his attempt to recreate the conditions that might restore the Enlightenment-inspired notion of the public sphere and its ideal public discourse. Chapter four, however, will show that a robust public discourse does not require the reconstruction of Habermas’ “bourgeois” public sphere, but rather the spaces of public
discourse have shifted to the “spheres of interaction within civil society where publics form and express opinions that bear on society’s capacity to reproduce itself” (Hauser, 
Vernacular 24). What is clear with Hauser is that those antecedents of civil society such as publics, public sphere and public opinion are already present and, unlike Habermas, do not require a theory of communication to conceptualize how they may become conditions for civil public discourse. To this end, while Habermas prescribes an ideal speech situation, in theory, as the foundation for public discourse in a democracy, Hauser takes an empirical approach to describe what can be observed in civil society when one recognizes the way everyday people actually participate, in other words, demonstrate “publicness.” Marketers can, thus, seek opportunities today to engage those discursive spaces that arise in civil society where publics develop and express themselves thereby helping to create the conditions for deliberation in the marketplace. Through Hauser, marketers can understand society rhetorically and come to know how people function as influential agents of communication with the power to shape public opinion. Additionally, Hauser prepares the marketer to recognize the contingent nature of communicating with their stakeholders by emphasizing the way in which discourse forms and is expressed.

This chapter shows how Hauser’s rhetorical theory of civil society can be appropriated for marketing communication. Consequently, the idea of a civil public discourse is conceivable when marketing communication is interpreted as part of an ongoing discursive process in which publics are revealed, public spheres are discovered and public opinion is understood not exclusively as the objective datum of market research, but rather through the actual members of publics communicating and
responding to the messages they receive including through “vernacular rhetoric” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 14). Furthermore, when marketing communication is understood as a discursive process, rather than an application of social science, the marketplace can more effectively integrate civil society’s function as a network of associations “whose members through social interactions that balance conflict and consensus, seek to regulate themselves” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 21). As a result, marketers and their publics engage in discursive practices that build the trust essential to sustaining the relationships that are said to be the *telos* of marketing communication practice. Dialogic engagement is grounded in the discourses of marketers and their publics who through their interactions “encounter difference, learn of the other's interests, develop understanding of where there are common goals, and where they may develop the levels of trust necessary for them to function in a world of mutual dependency” (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 271).

To further advance an understanding of how dialogue is reframed in marketing communication practice and to address the concerns that Habermas and his critics have raised on the public sphere, chapter four examines how Hauser’s rhetorical theory of civil society generates important parallels for achieving civil discourse in the marketplace. To accomplish this, two constructs are necessary to frame marketing communication; the rhetorical features of civil society, i.e., the notion of publics, public sphere and public opinion, introduced in chapter one, and vernacular talk as the basis for deliberation and dialogue in the marketplace. It can be argued that the marketplace helps anchor civil society by entering diverse public spheres and engaging the rhetoric of those publics who seek to create a shared reality. Dialogue emerges as part of a rhetorical process achieved in the construction of that shared reality and “reflects our political, social and cultural
competence” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 100). Marketers and their publics work to build the trust necessary to sustain a civil public discourse over the course of their interactions.

A civil public discourse between marketers and everyday people suggests a democratic quality to the way in which communication is developed and expressed. Habermas, of course, makes deliberative discourses the *sine qua non* of democratic communication, however, when deliberation is structured too formally, the contexts for democratic discourse are seemingly reduced to only the smallest of deliberating bodies. Democratic communication, though, does not always entail a deliberative process, and not every citizen chooses to participate as an active member of civil society, or their degree of participation does not always cohere with the norms of conventional civic participation. This reality of civic life is lost on some scholars who have criticized the marketplace for similar reasons. Edwards, for example, claims that public relations too often focuses on the role of communicator and message while neglecting to map out the role of target audiences as they cocreate meaning (836).

Understanding the degree to which consumers may contribute to the meaning-making process of public discourse not only demonstrates their rhetorical power, but also helps set the conditions by which democratic communication is a product of engagement with marketers. The basis of this democratic communication is the ongoing effort of marketers to know the way their publics develop and express their opinions. The good that consumers derive is the possibility to contribute their ideas, beliefs, and concerns to the substance of public discourse as well as shape the causes and agendas of marketers. Marketers benefit from understanding the formation of these opinions and the possibility
for interpreting their meaning in ways that can enhance marketing communication, meet marketing goals and integrate relevant social and political values.

Marketing communication, framed as part of a discursive process, has a democratizing effect on the marketplace when it helps create a space for marketers and their publics to interact on issues and concerns that emerge in the natural give and take that characterizes discursive engagement. The notion that marketing communication can be attentive to the particular circumstances that produce public opinion suggests that consumers are legitimate political and social rhetors occupying a shared reality with marketers from which to shape the tone and direction of public discourse. This is not to say that consumers share equal status as a speaker because marketers commit to a priori criteria for democratic communication, or because both marketer and consumer are called to capitulate individual needs and concerns in the interest of the public good. The marketplace is democratized as discourses are developed and expressed. Questions of equality, participation and access to public spheres of communication are not addressed formally, but as a consequence of those marketers who recognize and engage their publics in the formation of discourses that shape the course of society (Hauser, *Vernacular* 11). The meaning of the consumer changes as marketers interpret the communicative agency of the people they engage. The discourse that ensues points to a dual role for the consumer in civil society and the marketplace:

Whether conceived as citizens or consumers, audiences or users, customers or communities, there is growing momentum behind the argument that ordinary people are being – and must be – repositioned, by technology, the market, society (Livingstone et al. 616).
Interpreting the shift from passive consumer to active citizen requires recognizing the way ordinary people participate in discourse. When marketing communication is viewed as part of an ongoing public discourse, the marketplace becomes a public setting for diverse discourses including public opinion on social and political issues. Through the formation of these discourses, the marketplace experiences a democratizing process of “creating, negotiating, and codefining meaning” (Edwards 837). Scholars concerned with consumer culture often claim that formal democratic processes will reverse the oft-cited statistical trend of consumer apathy. Certainly, Habermas’ theory on deliberative discourse represents one such case. However, activating the citizen persona does not necessarily require participation in the formal processes of civic and political life. Because everyday citizens can participate in public discourse informally, the claim that people have become more apathetic is suspect. As such, the formation of civic-identity in consumers is, as Hannah Arendt might suggest, an “artificial creation, a product of action and speech” (d’Entreves 150). Yet, it is an artificiality of the highest cultural order, for it enables “individuals to transcend the necessities of life and fashion a world within which free political action and discourse could flourish” (Ibid).

Arendt’s point underscores a causal relationship between the communicative potential of consumers and the marketplace as a public realm for civil, democratic discourse. Arguably, consumers become aware of the meaning of their roles as citizens in those discursive spaces where, along with marketers, they demonstrate a shared responsibility to the society in which they live and the marketplace in which they do business. This means that freedom to shop is as much a part of their duty as a citizen in a
democratic society as freedom to state a political opinion. Can the marketplace, then, function as a vital public realm?

According to Hauser, Arendt’s purpose in the *Human Condition* was to show that a “vital public realm” was essential to create the conditions from which a “common sense of reality” would form through an individual’s “agency for action” (*Vernacular* 268). Mayhew recalls Arendt’s point as a practical concern by wondering “how and where potential public spaces for improved and effective discourse can be created or, perhaps, found and regenerated” (144). Arendt’s point sets forth the foundation upon which the marketplace in civil economy can be understood. The marketplace is a vital public realm in which marketers and consumers engage one another on issues brought to bear by a variety of publics through a multiplicity of discursive spaces. Consumers and marketers build toward a civil discourse when consumers, as a public, form over issues that take on public interest and marketers seek to recognize and respond to them. Public discourse in today’s marketplace emerges from the rhetorical qualities that shape civil society. Marketers and consumers cultivate the grounds of participation in this communicative process whose “foundations of publics, public spheres, and public opinions reside in the rhetorical transactions of a society” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 273).

**Consumers as Publics**

Identity can be understood in terms of communicative agency. If there is a concern that our citizens are not sufficiently involved in public affairs, it is argued that society, and consequently its discursive spheres, can no longer sustain essential democratic, civil discourse. As discussed in chapter three, Habermas assigns much of the blame to the incursion of global marketers and media corporations into the autonomous
communicative realms of the public (*Structural Transformation*). The notion of identity, then, has become a driving concern for some critical scholars of market economy who emphasize the communicative agency of consumers as the means to overcome the perceived domination of the public sphere and, therefore, demonstrate their social will by constructing meaningful discourses. Arendt posits the notion of “meaningful identity” as the goal of political activity and, as such, is “only achieved in political action and is always a result of interaction with others” (Farmer et al. 109). In the rhetorical marketplace, it is becoming essential to gauge the political and social influence of consumers. Public opinion and, consequently, a meaningful consumer identity emerge as consumers reveal their political and social will in discourse. The idea, then, that public discourse has been denigrated because of the rise of consumerism appears as mythical as the ambiguous public that marketers claim to know and that some scholars deny exists. Hauser, for example, cautions against dismissing the existence of authentic publics given the flawed process of public discourse:

> I believe these reports of imminent demise are exaggerations. Their distortion comes from looking for “the public” in the wrong places through conceptual lenses radically out of focus. (*Vernacular* 30)

Hauser’s theory on publics problematizes marketers’ claims to have isolated a common understanding of consumers as target audiences or publics. Target publics are not so easily identifiable. However, when we look in the right place for “the public” in the marketplace, we are likely to find consumers whose communicative identity is formed in discourse. Consumer identity does not always neatly align with the market profiling techniques that are at the core of market research. As such, consumer identity is
not easily reducible to classifiable psychological traits, but rather in the temporality of always changing marketing conditions where communication situations change as political, social and economic developments compel people to respond discursively. In the classic model of a “rhetorical situation,” Bitzer shows that the fundamental concern of rhetoric is action aimed toward addressing a situation that causes the need for rhetoric:

A work of rhetoric is pragmatic; it comes into existence for the sake of something beyond itself; it functions ultimately to produce action or change in the world; it performs some task. In short, rhetoric is a mode of altering reality…by the creation of discourse which changes reality through the mediation of thought and action. (3-4)

Marketing communication can be said to create marketplace reality discursively. However, a marketer’s publics also possess such communicative power, for as Bitzer shows, an audience consists of “those persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (Bitzer 8). Rhetoric, thus, enables people to create themselves communicatively as a public when a public emerges to attend to matters of public need. Rhetoric, then, produces the conditions for deliberative participation in the public discourse on such matters. As a correlating principle, both Habermas and Hauser show that publics are formed from participation in the communication practices they engage when confronting issues of consequence. However, they differ on the precise manner in which participation is demonstrated. Habermas grounds participation in formal communication praxis. Speech acts are the exercise of “free discussion” that occur in a “variety of autonomous social groups” and coalesce in a “politically active public sphere” which helps create an “authentic public” (Mayhew
His notion of participation, then, is a prescription for democratic communication in which political discourse is deliberated and expressed as a formal procedure for discourse. Hauser, meanwhile, contends that participation emerges as publics form through shared discourse or when they “become aware of their shared conditions through talk” (Benoit-Barne, “Formation of Publics”). Participation, thus, can be informal and a product of the vernacular talk that creates a public (Hauser *Vernacular*). In the traditional, political sense, the “public” has been thought of as “the people” and, as the “bearer of public opinion,” they represent the “ultimate source of legitimate governing power” (Mayhew 137).

In the rhetorical marketplace, marketers confront the political, social and economic will of consumers who through a discursive process of collective reasoning deliver “civil judgments” that impact the tone and direction of marketing communication (Hauser, *Vernacular* 74). In doing so, consumers shape public discourse “aimed at generating or sustaining, through participation, new spaces of public connection, new spaces of mutuality” (Couldry 24). The idea that consumers are able to create public spaces suggests that not only do they own the potential to contribute to a discourse which opens new discursive spaces, but also their identity is formed as an active public capable of expressing a political and social will. The influence that consumers have on the formation of public discourse is more profound when rhetorical agency is viewed as the primary means through which a body of individual consumers become a legitimate, active public:

The transformations of the public sphere are, therefore, part of rhetorical analysis as “the subject is formed and transformed in the reality of
rhetoric.” Thus, the concept of the public sphere must be viewed as rhetorical by definition. (Sinekopova 508 quoting Burke)

Though both Habermas and Hauser would agree that the formation of publics is central to our understanding of participation and civil society, Habermas’ sketch of an overarching, rational-critical public, as discussed earlier, runs counterintuitive to a marketplace characterized by “conditions of diversity and inclusion” (Benoit-Barne “Formation of Publics”). Habermas’ notion of public is problematic given the realities of our culturally fragmented society. By laying out norms for discourse, in advance of an ideal public that represents a model public sphere, Habermas’ discourse ethics frustrates the marketer’s ability to respond to the pluralistic nature of the marketplace.

This is an issue routinely found in popular as well as scholarly literature where the concepts of multiculturalism and diversity are invoked to draw attention to the challenges of communicating in today’s marketplace. By way of example, Newsweek estimates that in 2050, non-Hispanic whites will make up just 47 percent of the total U.S. population (“Stirring the Pot”). As the United States becomes increasingly multicultural, marketers are developing marketing communication that appeals to the needs and concerns of a range of diverse consumers. Echoing the need for such marketing communication programs in the American marketplace, Gary L. Lampley, president of the Black Retail Action Group (BRAG), is “encouraging African-American consumers to buy from firms that support minority workers, use them in marketing and advertising campaigns and promote them to senior management” (Silverman 12). Marketers are expected to seek ways to serve people of all color as an essential “strategic priority” (Ibid). In practice,
marketers cultivate demographic data to create select profiles of the people with whom they communicate.

The practice of demography, therefore, has been a primary frame from which marketers have identified their audiences. Multicultural markets, however, amplify the challenge of American demographics prompting a host of communication issues marketers must contend with including, “how to speak to different audiences, how to connect with diverse cultures, and, most importantly, how to listen to their needs” (Sison 167). Marketers, as a principle of marketing communication practice, make ethnicity, gender and race, among others, extraordinary characteristics that define the needs, concerns, interests and, ultimately, the identity of consumers. Reducing the population to easily condensed social and cultural stereotypes, however, dilutes the capacity for diverse consumers to be viewed as a viable public outside of one’s particular demographic category. Marketers are essentially recreating the identity of their markets in such a way that one’s private demographics are the primary historical consideration for marketing communication. Marketing communication programs that appeal to the non-communicative criteria of their audiences help shape an identity where personal preferences and tastes are the defining conditions of discourse.

As a concern in the study of public spheres, the appeal to these preferences and tastes, assumed to be the product of diverse criteria, does not engender a public identity, understood in the rhetorical sense of term, as much as identify a group of people who share common physical traits or lifestyle attitudes. There is a difference between diversity defined by an ideological-driven set of criteria such as race, gender, and class, and diversity attributed to constantly emerging publics formed in the particular moment in
which groups of people develop and express opinions on issues that contribute to
discourses of politics, society and economy. Arendt was clear to distinguish diversity as a
condition of a healthy discursive arena rather than a demographic category:

The political is the space where power is delegated and decentralized by
the active participation of large numbers of citizens, diversity and plurality
are produced and respected, and distinctive or creative actions are
cherished. (Farmer et al. 109)

Arendt’s point enables an understanding of the way in which democratic
discourses are created in the marketplace while framing the implications of pluralism so
that the productive communicative function of diversity is preserved. In the act of
responding to situations which have public consequence, discourses are created and
publics are formed. The variety of issues and opinions are not ordered, but rather arise in
discourse. Through the richness of these discourses and the many publics that develop
and express their opinions, marketers have opportunities to engage with publics and
respond to the diversity of the marketplace. Marketers come to know the diverse
marketplace in the discursive process where their publics speak their needs and concerns
and marketers engage them. This interaction helps shape the shared reality upon which
effective marketing communication depends. When marketers pay attention to their
publics as they form and respond with integrity in the various spheres from which they
express their opinions, the marketplace is more likely to effect a civil public discourse. In
such a marketplace, stakeholders are not constrained by an overarching procedure for
discourse, and no one particular group is either prevented from, or privileged to express
their opinions.
Consumers, thus, become a public in the “discursive space in which individuals and groups associate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment about them” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 21). Moreover, they are able to maintain their diverse nature, transcending the myth of a singular entity, as the “interdependent members of society who hold different opinions about a mutual problem and who seek to influence its resolution through discourse” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 32).

**The Marketplace as a Reticulate Public Sphere**

Diversity in the marketplace, framed discursively, deemphasizes the notion of identity, understood as a demographic category, and focuses instead on those points of contact where different publics form and express their ideas and opinions. In other words, as the marketplace sustains multiple sites for discursive engagement, diversity is formed from the differential rhetorics that emerge as part of the public discourse. In this way, the marketplace responds to the plural nature of society. The pluralistic character of civil society, as it produces itself rhetorically, is what Hauser describes as the “reticulate” public sphere (“Civil Society” 21). The reticulate public sphere facilitates the discourse of publics who as “members of pluralistic societies, belong to several, perhaps many overlapping discursive arenas” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 67). Unlike the ideal speech concept, germane to Habermas’ discourse ethics, it is not a monolithic setting from which to transcend difference and create uniform publics bound by consensus. The reticulate public sphere is a public realm that can accommodate the discourses of multiple publics on issues that often reflect competing ideas and opinions which may not gain a hearing in the conventional public sphere of mass society. Because of the potential for countless
discursive arenas in the marketplace, common agreement is not an essential attribute of civil public discourse:

Unlike social and political movements of the past that centered on class interests, today’s movements are spawned by issues that reflect our ideological fragmentation. Positing shared substantive interests as ‘the publics’ theoretical basis makes it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to think sensibly about actually existing publics that form through and in response to these new social movements… (Hauser, *Vernacular* 30)

Hauser’s point is not to suggest that competing publics cannot engage in a meaningful dialogue even when their interests may diverge. After all, communication is consistently cited as the primary means to reassert commonality where none seems to exist (*Vernacular* 31). Hauser, instead, argues that the potential for dialogue is best approached rhetorically. Rhetoric, then, is the defining condition of the reticulate public sphere and provides the communicative framework from which to understand how publics form and address questions of how the many may participate in a way that reflects the democratic aspirations of deliberative dialogue. As a communication concept, the reticulate public sphere countervails the criticism that dialogue is impractical given a society splintered into special interests and ethical relativism, i.e., the critical norms that guide the reticulate public sphere are “derived from actual discursive practices” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 61). In this context, a practical discourse proceeds from the “reasonableness” of an idea derived in discussion as opposed to the “rationality” of a system that orders discourse:
In the course of discussing an issue, arguments and appeals will differentiate themselves in terms of their persuasiveness and success in forging identifications. Assessing the status of an appeal depends on gauging its reasonableness across multiple perspectives. (Hauser, *Vernacular* 61)

Effective marketing communication, in the reticulate public sphere, means that the norms of dialogic engagement are often negotiated in historically specific circumstances that characterize how discourse is developed and expressed. The true dialogic opportunity for marketers is the ability to engage ordinary people in the many ways in which they actually communicate on the issues they initiate in discourse. The scope of communication, here, is framed as the public’s ability to develop and express opinions in both formal and informal communication contexts. Hauser depicts some of those communication activities that constitute the reticulate public sphere and, therefore, the rhetorical character of publics as anything from “exercising their buying power, demonstrations of sympathy or opposition, adornments of colored ribbons, debates in the classrooms and on factory floors, speeches on library steps or letters to the editor, correspondence with public officials, and other expressions of stance and judgment” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 33). Yet, the true dialogic nature of the reticulate public sphere is realized in its “conversational quality” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 101).

Marketers today have an opportunity to acquire the knowledge of publics, and their discursive capabilities, to more effectively participate in the “process of public conversation” that characterizes public discourse (Hauser, *Vernacular* 65). What defines the shift from a conventional conversation approach to a more radical model that
integrates the rhetoric of its publics, however, are those marketers who seek to understand vernacular talk as legitimate public opinion. Public discourse, then, is generated, in large sum, by “our daily conversations with coworkers, neighbors, superiors, subordinates, community, and church contacts, group members, friends and family…” (Ibid). Because this type of talk takes place outside of the traditional boundaries of conventional public spheres, marketers are learning that to communicate with key publics demands that they negotiate the contingencies from which conversations emerge. The essence of successful marketing communication in the reticulate public sphere is finding ways to be part of this conversation, i.e., to be aware of the public’s use of rhetoric to create discursive spaces from which to engage in a dialogue that recognizes the value of vernacular talk. Viewing human communication as an ongoing conversation, some formal, some informal, enables marketers an additional perspective on the way their publics communicate. Dialogic engagement is shaped by marketers and their publics as “participants in the social conversation” from which they may “learn and also contribute to themes that inculcate shared motives” (Ibid).

It must be noted, however, that conversation, as either metaphor or model for public discourse, is not unique. Tonn discusses how the notion of “conversation” has gained scholarly credibility over the past few years. More importantly though, she raises the concern that conversation, as a framework for deliberation, may both “impede rather than further democratic goals, and…function as a therapeutic substitute for policy formation necessary to remedy social ills” (405). Tonn’s claim is relevant given the potential for meaninglessness that may result from unstructured conversations. Hauser’s notion of conversation, on the other hand, is descriptive, rather than ideal, and consistent
with a philosophical understanding of how meaning is constructed and, therefore, does not command a particular political or social agenda:

A conversational model of society requires that participants share intersubjective meanings. These are the meanings that constitute a *we* and that, in fact, are a source of significance for our own self-awareness in addition to our purely subjective stance. They are more than communal understandings of denotation. They are public in character (*Vernacular* 67).

The social “conversation” that Hauser has in mind resides in the common reference world necessary for rhetorically salient meanings to emerge. People cannot communicate effectively, particularly at the public level, if the significance of an issue is not already shared. Meaning is, thus, already present among participants and consequently enables members to grasp the public reality that is the focus of their communicative actions. Marketers must pay attention to the way a public experiences events, actions, and information that constitute their reality to judge the significance of an issue. The potential for conversation represents the openness to discourse that arises in historically grounded communication contexts across different segments of society acting as publics.

The reticulate public sphere functions as a discursive space for the kind of common, ordinary, what Hauser refers to as “vernacular,” rhetoric that characterizes the conversation. The distinction of vernacular rhetoric lies in its “non-formal symbolic exchanges by which typical citizens, and not just the marginalized, express opinions and seek agreement” (Hauser, “On Reading” 220). At the heart of this conversation are the
vernacular exchanges which both “lack and transcend the force of official authority” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 67). Participants do not necessarily seek approval to communicate, nor do they require the endorsement of an authorizing agent to respond to messages received. And because the nature of publics is evanescent, lacking continuous existence, it is possible to conceive of the members of pluralistic societies belonging to many, “overlapping discursive arenas” (Ibid). In reality, then, the marketplace reflects a plurality of people who create many ongoing, yet impermanent discursive arenas.

In the rhetorical marketplace, dialogue proceeds as marketers discover emerging publics through their rhetoric. Commonsense sites of discourse are created and become the spheres from which conversations can take place and relationships forged:

Civil society’s mélange of vernacular rhetoric is our most sensitive locus from which publics emerge. (Hauser, *Vernacular* 100)

Civility, then, is not determined by degree of participation, nor is it a wholesome public attitude. Civility, in the rhetorical marketplace, means being a part of the “ongoing social conversation” that forms a “network of associations” and, thus, opportunities to engage publics as their interests and those of others intersect (Hauser, *Vernacular* 70). Reading vernacular rhetoric enriches the opportunity, for dialogue for it requires an interlocutor’s presence to arrive at rhetorically salient meanings.

**Public Opinion in the Rhetorical Marketplace**

Hauser develops a discourse-based theory of public opinion as an alternative to the rational deliberative model of Habermas and the opinion-poll model that currently reflects the norms of marketing communication practice. The importance of Hauser’s theory lies in his examination of the nature of public opinion and its implications on
marketing communication. When discourse is understood to be the basis for public opinion, it is possible to gain a clearer picture of the way “rhetorically engaged actors deliberate over social, political, and cultural issues” (Hauser, Vernacular 89).

Hauser’s rhetorical theory of public opinion is intended to demonstrate more precisely the way rhetoric shapes the formation of public opinion, i.e., as a rhetorical process whereby actual members of publics “communicate to one another” (Hauser, Vernacular 84). Hauser’s interpretation of public opinion emphasizes “the practical reasoning endemic in the use of symbols to coordinate social action, or rhetoric” (Vernacular 84). Additionally, “publics” are distinguished from special interest groups to show that ordinary people can, through their discourse, form spontaneously and for their own purposes. Hauser’s model is significant to an understanding of marketing communication since it more accurately reflects the possibility of civil public discourse by demonstrating that the communicative power of everyday people lies in the capacity for vernacular rhetoric to shape public opinion. In other words, the conversations of everyday people are infused with practical wisdom, symbolic creativity and the quality of “publicness” when issues, that have public significance, warrant public action.

This is the reason why public opinion is, by nature, rhetorical rather than rational or technical. People will respond to a given issue or communicate their concerns using a variety of communicative means that converge in the “common matters from which the agency of public conversations derives its meaning” (Hauser, Vernacular 74). Hauser, thus, shows “civil judgment” to be the product of those publics who are “actively weighing and shaping the course of society” (Ibid). Public opinion, as civil judgment, is evidence of a public’s capacity to “form a prevailing view of preference and possibly of
value” through a process of collective reasoning (Ibid). Civil judgment, then, reflects a
temporal moral judgment that converges as shared meaning from the totality of discursive
exchanges over an issue that has public importance.

Hauser’s notion of civil judgment resuscitates the democratic principle that
underscores Habermas’ depiction of the way people participate in the formation of civil
public spheres, i.e., offentlichkeit. As mentioned in chapter one, offentlichkeit, translated
as “publicness,” demonstrates the way ordinary individuals develop and articulate public
opinion in civil society. When rhetorical practices are examined to recognize the way
public discourse forms, everyday people can be shown to occupy a central role in the
formation of public spheres. These discursive “zones” of critical judgment, then, function
to demonstrate the collective reasoning power of ordinary people acting as a public
(Habermas, Vernacular 24).

In marketing communication, the motivation for market research is to more
cogently identify a marketer’s publics and discern how this information can enhance
communication. The ambiguous mass public that is often cited in survey data is, as
Hauser shows us, formed of many diverse groups who create themselves rhetorically and,
as such, are competent at producing and expressing opinions capable of shaping the
social, political, and cultural arenas in which we live. Hauser’s position contrasts with the
cynical view some scholars advance on the degree to which publics may express opinions
that have the force to shape significant public matters. Ewen, for example, contends that
public relations still threatens the ability for individuals to participate as engaged publics
in any meaningful way:
Today, with a powerful machinery of opinion management deeply entrenched-and little coherent opposition heard from below-the meaning and realization of democracy have become more and more elusive. (409)

Ewen questions whether civic participation is possible given a public that has “no collective presence,” and no ability to “act for itself” (Ibid). If we accept Ewen’s argument, then, public relations continues to fulfill the mandate of its primary architect, Edward Bernays, i.e., to function as society’s “unseen engineers” (Ibid). Furthermore, it is possible to interpret, as problematic, contemporary marketing communication programs when they are exclusively planned around marketing research which fails to apprehend the discursive capabilities of its publics. Marketers are at risk to both misunderstand publics, when viewing communication primarily as a technical rather than rhetorical practice, and assume that their role in the discourse-making process, then, is somehow removed from their research techniques. Such an understanding suggests that marketers do not always appreciate the constructive power of language.

As Brownlie and Saren point out, “we cannot escape the problem of language and discourse, or go beyond them in order to look at an issue from an objective and distant perspective, for we end up having to use language to construct this objectivity through presupposing objects and distance” (154). Hauser, however, is useful to demonstrate how marketing communication is working against this cynicism. His rhetorical model of public opinion refutes the accusation raised by Lippmann and supported by Ewen that ordinary citizens cannot have a direct stake in public affairs (Public Opinion 29). In the rhetorical marketplace, marketers have the opportunity to utilize a communication approach that reflects a common sense understanding of the way in which dialogue
develops with their audiences. Hauser sets the conditions from which such a dialogue may evolve:

Sensible thought about publics requires capturing their activity: how they construct reality by establishing and synthesizing values, forming opinions, acceding to positions, and cooperating through symbolic actions, especially discursive ones. (33)

Because Hauser’s theory on the rhetorical public sphere emphasizes the function of rhetoric in civil society, it is a suitable framework for showing how marketing communication can recognize and respond to the discursive capabilities of marketers’ audiences. This is a valuable shift in theoretical perspective for marketers because the concept of “integrated,” in modern marketing communication theory, advises strategically controlling or influencing all messages sent to a marketer’s customers (Dewhirst & Davis, Duncan). This rationale for marketing communication, while ideally intended to understand consumers better and forge mutually beneficial relationships, is limited to one-way communication strategies and affective appeals:

At the heart of successful strategies in the twenty-first century will be carefully crafted and integrated marketing and corporate communication strategies…The image of the object (whether individual or corporate brand) is likely to be increasingly dependent not just on the functions it (ostensibly) serves but on its contributions to self-image and its contributions to happiness (or feeling good). (Proctor and Kitchen 152-153)
However, when marketers aim to understand a public’s ability to express opinions in discourse, relationship-building can be more realistically assessed as an historically situated process of constructing socially and politically meaningful discourses with diverse publics. Furthermore, marketers may view the possibility of dialogue with these publics as opportunities to engage, understand, and respond to their vernacular discourses. Integration in the rhetorical marketplace, then, is understood as “interacting with the meanings of direct conversational partners or indirectly addressed individuals, groups, or even classes of society…” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 8). Public opinion emerges as part of the “dialogizing” of the many rhetorical expressions that marketers are challenged to understand.

**Reframing Dialogue as Rhetoric “Dialogized”**

Marketing communication is necessarily strategic as marketers research, plan, and execute specific communication tactics. Strategy often emerges from motivated communication participants and does not necessarily preclude dialogue. It also does not work against a rhetorical perspective. Strategy, as used here, is objectionable when it is intended to circumvent the variety of opinions and perspectives that are inherent in the discursive processes that constitute the reticulate public sphere, i.e., to run, hide, grin, and spin (Farrell, *Norms* 305). Therefore, since discursive formation is the foundation for engagement in the rhetorical marketplace, market research, technological innovation, and communication tactics must proceed from the primary understanding that communicating with diverse publics, in multiple discursive settings, means apprehending the dialogizing process from which opinions are formed. Successful marketing means embracing the vernacular talk of publics as essential to dialogic engagement.
Even though Habermas restricts the communicative parameters of effective public discourse to deliberative modes of political debate and discussion, thus, narrowing the field of participants, Hauser shows that meaningful discourses can be shaped by those who do not qualify as authorized voices, institutional actors, and individuals speaking on behalf of formerly organized groups:

As Habermas has argued, a public sphere is created whenever two or more individuals converse about a public matter. Each of these individualized local associative spaces is potentially included in larger, more polyphonous exchanges. When the outcome is public opinion, what starts as a dialogue becomes part of the multilogue of voices along the range of individuals and groups engaged by a public question (Hauser, Vernacular 62).

Hauser’s point has relevance for marketplace communication in that the potential for dialogue exists as marketers read the opinions of their publics when marketing language enters into dialogue with the language of other interlocutors (Vernacular 8). Using Bakhtin’s social theory of language and meaning, Hauser suggests a way to understand a concept of dialogue that is attainable when applied to conditions of pluralism and concerns of participation. Specifically, Hauser shows how Bakhtin’s notion of “dialogism” makes communication and meaning a co-constructive process. Marketing communication that aims to construct a dialogue, however, is confronted by the tension between meaning that emerges from the give and take of communicators in the act of communicating, and meaning that is imposed on communicators when messages are communicated in monologic modes. In other words, the intersubjectivity of human
communication conflicts with the objectivity toward which marketing communication aims. This tension points out how marketing communication often utilizes communication tactics such as advertising, sales promotions, news releases, direct marketing and now internet marketing, that employ monologic language, i.e., language that reflects the voice of a “unitary speaker, a speaker who has an unmediated relation to ‘his unitary and singular own language’” (Klages 137). It must be noted that the monologic messages of some marketing communication tactics, such as television or billboards, are a viable means to communicate to mass publics and can support dialogic efforts sustained in more interpersonal settings.

However, when viewed critically, the one-way communication strategy of marketers may appear to result in an anti-dialogical communication position with publics. In such instances, marketing communication is challenged to overcome the limitations that derive from monologic messages. Monologia, according to Bakhtin, reflects a speaker who pushes “all the elements of language, all of its rhetorical modes, the journalistic, the religious, the political, the economic…into one single form or utterance, coming from one central point” (Klages 138). Bakhtin, thus, distinguishes between the “centripetal” dynamis in discourse that aims toward singular, unitary thought and meaning, and the “centrifugal” forces of a discourse that push meaning toward multiple interpretations and voices, hence, inviting new perspective, opinions, and rhetorical modes of expression.

Some critics have claimed that integrated marketing communication is seemingly designed to operate from a centripetal communication position since structurally it not only works to integrate the “different marketing communications disciplines,” but also
attempts to “align and integrate the whole marketing communications function with public relations or corporate communications into one integrated communications function” (Cornelissen 489). However, the claim that integrated marketing communication is inclined toward centripetal discourse is less likely attributable to its structural elements as a whole and more likely an unreflective discursive strategy that emerges in challenging communication contexts. This is, perhaps, the case of the Bridgestone/Firestone tire manufacturer a few years ago.

In August of 2000, the company announced a voluntary recall of several brands of the company’s tires linked to numerous fatal car accidents around the world. Though significant evidence of a manufacturing defect emerged years before the public recall, Firestone refused to admit that there was a problem. In the ensuing weeks, the century-old Firestone brand endured a relentless barrage of bad publicity and blistering public condemnation that was less a consequence of the defective tires and more because of a “lack of communication at the highest levels of management and a blatant disregard for the power of public opinion” (Nicolazzo & Nickson 41). From statements generated by the crisis communication professionals at Firestone, it was clear that the marketer’s strategy was to engineer a sympathetic public response by presenting the tragic events as an unforeseen result caused by the volatile composition of tires. All discourse, then, could be framed as a technical consideration of this highly complex science of which only the privileged few could truly understand and participate in its construction. Firestone’s team of experts could then manage meanings, preempt counter interpretations and “enforce a singular, authoritative voice” upon the public (Allen 26).
On the first day of the announced recall, Firestone stated, “it may take time to scientifically determine the cause of the problem. Tires are highly complex engineered products. A typical tire can have more than 26 components, 14 different compounds, and require 29 separate steps to manufacture” (Firestone Press Release, Statement by Gary Crigger). Five days later, Christine Karbowiak, vice president of public affairs at Firestone, defiantly remarked that “anyone or any group can make unsubstantiated allegations,” thus, making all valid assessments dependent on expert opinion (Firestone Press Release, Statement by Christine Karbowiak). On August 23, 2000, Firestone placed full page advertisements in major newspapers all around the country reiterating the initial claims that science, in due time, will determine what, if any, problem existed. During the recall Firestone summarily dismissed the utterances of anyone who publicly challenged their expertise on tire issues. The public read this as an untenable monologic stance. The case of Bridgestone/Firestone represents the risk of adopting a monologic strategy intended to discourage competing points of view and opinions.

Bakhtin contrasts a monologic discursive strategy with the notion of “heteroglossia” (Klages 138). Heteroglossia reflects the “conflict between centripetal and centrifugal” discourses (Allen 213). The multiplicity of languages operating in a culture, including all forms of social speech and rhetorical modes of communicating, constitute the heteroglossic nature of human beings in dialogue with one another (Klages 138). True dialogue, consequently, escapes the instrumentality of those interlocutors who seek to manage a single meaning as was the case, arguably, with Firestone, for the value of dialogue is the capacity for a speaker to not only be “attuned to her own language(s),” but also the languages of her listeners (Klages 141). In such an interaction, attention to the
heteroglossic characteristic of human communication means that interlocutors embrace the reality that “language is never our own, that there is no single human subject who could possibly be the object of psychological investigation, that no interpretation is ever complete because every word is a response to previous words and elicits further responses” (Allen 27-28). In Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics, Bakhtin frames such a dialogue as fundamental to human communication:

It is quite understandable that the dialog [sic] must lie at the center of Dostoevsky’s artistic world, and the dialog not as a means, but as an end in itself. Dialog is for him not the threshold to action, but the action itself… here the person is not only outwardly manifested, he becomes for the first time that which he is, not only- we repeat-as far as others are concerned, but for himself as well. To be, means to communicate dialogically. (213)

Understanding this concept of dialogue both enables marketers to be aware of the rhetorical elements in discourse and opens them to the idea that meaning is a process of co-construction. Bakhtin again is useful here because he provides a theoretical way for marketers to gain perspective on the “otherness” implicit in dialogic interactions. Perhaps, most important to this dialogic engagement, though, is the process of discovering the truth that inheres in rhetorical praxis. As Sinekopova asserts, rhetorical theory and practices are “based on the embodiment of supposedly universal human capacities for reason, truth, and moral conduct” (506). Had Firestone grasped the discursive character upon which effective public relations works, that is, honesty as the basis of cooperative communication, admitting the truth would have helped the company
to maintain its trustworthy voice with key publics. However, by ignoring the rhetorical conditions from which an active public shapes the course of public opinion, they missed an opportunity for dialogue grounded in moral discourse, for example, deliberating on the right course of action.

Unlike Habermas’ ideal speech situation, Bakhtin’s portrayal of the dialogizing process offers only what is typical of ordinary human interactions. As Sanders suggests of Bakhtin’s dialogue, “both receiver and sender have been crammed full of words and sentences over the years, with ideas and habits, soaked in multiple layers of meanings. The language of one person meets the language of another, and in that entanglement of understanding and misunderstanding, with a good deal of work and some luck, glimmerings of meanings struggle into focus” (11). This is the reason why Hauser’s interpretation of Bakhtin is viable. Hauser’s rhetorical model of the public sphere makes us aware of the possibility that any interested group can contribute to the public discourse, for its character lies in the ordinary way in which people communicate, i.e., “the dialogical character of speech and the inevitability of heteroglossia in dialogue” (*Vernacular* 104).

Communicating effectively depends on an openness of rhetors to accept vernacular discourse as a valid means of developing and expressing an opinion and, thus, forming spheres of historically-situated public discourse. As such, a vernacular rhetoric is not only an intrinsic value of everyday communication, but it also provides a practical alternative to universal discourses presented as ideal speech. Much of public discourse is not ideal speech, yet it is able to assist the democratic orientation of civil society. In the *Good Citizen*, Schudson shows that vernacular rhetoric enables everyday people to
reconnect to their social and civic duties. The democratic power of people can be seen in historically-situated acts of vernacular rhetoric:

Citizens still exercise citizenship as they stand in line at their polling places, but now they exercise citizenship in many other locations. They have political ties not only to elected public officials in legislatures but also to attorneys in courtrooms and organized interest groups that represent them to administrative agencies. Moreover, they are citizens in their homes, schools, and places of employment. Women and minorities self-consciously do politics just by turning up, so long as they turn up in positions of authority and responsibility in institutions where women and minorities were once rarely seen. They do politics when they walk into a room, anyone’s moral equals, and expect to be treated accordingly. (299)

Vernacular communication is a crucial piece to the “consumer deliberating in the marketplace” puzzle. As Hauser points out, when vernacular discourse is accepted as a legitimate rhetorical mode, the potential for citizen participation in the discourse-making process becomes far more inclusive:

Vernacular discourse occurs in many forms, not just in speech and writing among known interlocutors. For example, cultural forms such as films, dramas, novels, and art are significantly dialogical…Similarly consumer movements, modes of protest, public symbols, overt group expressions of sentiment, and a shelf of collective activity that permit us to navigate problematic public contexts and issues act as conversations…(Ibid)
Dialogized rhetoric provides an alternative perspective on dialogue in the marketplace. As a practical concern, marketers may gain an understanding of the agency with which people are capable of contributing to discourses that bear on the significance of public matters. Consequently, today’s marketplace is shaped by a growing public concern on how marketers might work within their communities to sustain social and environmental progress over time. For this reason, “many firms are now starting to integrate communication activities with public purpose marketing or enlightened capitalism…” (Proctor and Kitchen 151). Dialogue with these publics, then, suggests that marketers develop an alacrity to interpret both the formal and vernacular rhetoric through which people make their opinions known on issues that have social, environmental as well as political and economic significance.
Chapter 5: Developing Relationships from Social Capital

**CSR and Marketing Communication**

This dissertation is concerned with evaluating the grounds for good, i.e., ethical public discourse in the marketplace. Interpretations on what counts as good public discourse abound. In his discussion on the “principles of public discourse,” Ryfe observes that good public discourse implies “reason and emotion, reciprocity and a willingness to confront difficult issues” (167). The idea that public discourse is born of difficult issues can prepare marketers to seek a conversational approach that demonstrates a willingness to focus on their publics and their values, interests and opinions. To this end, marketers often view the first step of dialogue as the ability to better understand their publics’ values, interests, and opinions. Some critics of marketing communication, however, suggest that dialogue can be little more than a “lofty goal” (Stoker and Tusinski 158). The constraints of communicating through mass media would seem to support this claim.

Interpreting the issue from a rhetorical framework, however, presents an opportunity to ascertain the grounds for dialogue as a characteristic of good public discourse in the marketplace. The possibility for dialogue may be lofty, but feasible as marketers consider how their marketing communication programs may integrate discourse as it is formed and expressed.

When marketers recognize, for example, that the marketplace is ripe for dialogized rhetoric, they may realistically assess the theoretical limitations associated with dialogic engagement. Dialogized rhetoric emphasizes the importance of vernacular talk in the formation of public opinion. As marketers open themselves to the vernacular rhetoric of their publics, they become part of the ongoing social conversation from which
ordinary people communicate their concerns, interests, and opinions. The cooperative meaning-making process of a dialogized rhetoric underscores the core ethic upon which models of marketing dialogue are built, i.e., to “imbue an understanding, confidence and respect of each other’s capabilities and concerns when enacting their role in the marketplace and the [sic] society” (Kavali and Saren 576). Kavali and Saren’s point shows how the notion of a marketing dialogue today can be interpreted as the discourse marketers and publics construct when they understand each other’s role and responsibility in the marketplace and society. Dialogized rhetoric provides an important communicative link between ordinary people and marketers as they make sense of issues germane to their shared reality of the marketplace including, moral accountability, economic prosperity and social responsibility (Thomas, “Marketing Paradise” 321). When marketers grasp the dialogizing process by which consumer discourses form, marketing communication opens itself to the “competing positions and interpretations” that comprise opportunities for discursive engagement in the marketplace (Hauser, *Vernacular* 104). Fitchett frames this in practical terms as either “the need to respond to consumers in a more responsible and ethical manner, or by assuming a correlation between stakeholder values and business performance” (16). In each case, it can be shown that marketers are making the need to forge an ethical discourse with their publics an essential driver of sound business practice.

This turn to “the other” also reflects a dialogic stance found in two significant ethical constructs in business, that is, social responsibility and social capital. Both ideas regard stakeholder relationships as foundational to ethical discourse and, consequently, good business:
The dynamic nature [of the corporate responsibility] agenda provides an opportunity for corporate groups such as ours to seek competitive advantage, by exploring new ways of approaching and engaging in relationships with their key stakeholders. (Economist Intelligence Unit, cited in Nehme and Wee 131)

In chapter five, I will discuss the degree to which social responsibility and social capital foster an ethical public discourse in the rhetorical marketplace. To do this, I will assess each of these concepts from a marketing communication perspective to determine their viability toward building relationships. First, I demonstrate how an ethic of social responsibility is regarded as sound business practice intended to create strong branding relationships. Second, I explain how social responsibility initiatives can encourage the participation of publics in the cocreation of meaningful discourse. Third, I argue that civil public discourse is enriched by a concept of “relationship” that emerges from the trust created between marketers and their publics in the discourse of socially responsible marketing. I conclude by showing how social capital can be interpreted as a metaphorical bridge between the dialogizing process of rhetoric in the marketplace and civil public discourse.

The call to social responsibility known alternatively as the “societal marketing concept,” CSR, or corporate social responsibility, and sometimes corporate citizenship, is evidenced in the mission of many businesses and reflected in their marketing communication. Since marketing communication is concerned with the “impact that organizational factors can have on consumer behaviour [sic].” social responsibility “would seem to offer a potentially powerful focus for organizations to communicate with
their customers” (Jones et al., 111). In other words, as marketers seek to build relationships with their publics, consumer knowledge of sound social practice is presumed to aid such relationships. Social responsibility is said to “improve relationships with employees, customers, and other stakeholders” (Jones et al., 110). However, because there is no “universally agreed definition of CSR” (Ibid), further scrutiny on the nature of the relationship that CSR engenders is necessary to generate consideration of the conditions for an ethical public discourse in the rhetorical marketplace.

CSR is often justified as sound business practice. A common belief for many companies in the twenty-first century is, doing good is good for business. Bessera and Miller, for example, show that “a significant group of business operators report positive attitudes toward their communities and report providing support for their communities” when the company integrates CSR initiatives into their policies and actions (238). The research also shows that there are a number of benefits that businesses derive from a commitment to CSR, it is said, including, “improved financial performance and profitability; reduced operating costs; long-term sustainability for companies and their employees; increased staff commitment and involvement; enhanced capacity to innovate and good relations with government and communities” (Ibid). Nevertheless, in the context of this chapter, the initial concern is the degree to which CSR messages contribute to an ethical public discourse. Developing effective stakeholder relationships is the basis for this discourse. Likewise, as chapter two discussed, marketing communication is the “critical ingredient in building and maintaining relationships” (Schultz et al., 39). Arguably, the purpose of CSR, therefore, is to build strong branding relationships. CSR grounded in a marketing communication program often aims to
enhance the reputation and value of the marketer’s brand (Ibid). As Bronn and Vrioni claim, “reputation, closely related to brand awareness, aids in brand differentiation and ultimately helps a company gain (through a good reputation) or lose (through a damaged reputation) competitive advantage” (209-211). An advertisement whose message is social responsibility is believed to elicit “more favorable consumer responses compared with a similar ad without a CRM [Cause-Related Marketing] component?” (Nan and Heo 70). Marketers who are able to communicate their “positive impact” on the environment and society “have increased brand equity” as well as their “power to drive demand” which makes their business more sustainable (“Should Marketers Be” 28).

Some critics claim that CSR is simply “corporate advertising that makes consumers aware of new products with features for which they are willing to pay” (Coors and Winegarden 10). Moreover, companies will engage in socially responsible activity only to “advertise its behavior, differentiate its product, increase market share, and boost profits” (Coors and Winegarden 11). If so, does this mean that the marketer is less genuine in their commitment to socially responsible marketing? Can marketers “do good” for society while simultaneously building their brands? Can a “profit-centric firm” act with the highest degree of socially responsible behavior? (Coors and Winegarden 10). Do CSR initiatives, promoted in marketing communication, deter an ethical public discourse in the marketplace?

The issue of whether a marketer engages in CSR merely for lip-service is similar to questioning whether a speaker is really as ethical as he/she professes. One can only evaluate their truthfulness when the rhetors’ actions are measured against their speech or, in this dissertation, marketing communication. CSR messages that are part of a marketing
communication effort do not discourage an ethical public discourse simply by forging a relationship the consumer has with the brand. CSR, in fact, functions effectively and often as a one-way strategy to communicate the good work that a company is doing. As such, the company benefits from building stronger brand to consumer relationships grounded in an ethic of responsible marketing. Good public discourse is advanced, in part, by marketing communication messages that emphasize the good work of the marketer.

A subtle, yet, relevant distinction, however, between CSR and the concept of social capital is worth noting. This distinction is brought to bear when either concept is the focus of trade or scholarly discussions on relationship-building. CSR initiatives make sense as a motivation to build strong brands. The notion of the relationship in CSR is grounded in the branding process, for the discourse is often shaped by the consumer’s willingness to purchase the brand. Perhaps for this reason, the consumer is thought to possess more power in their relationship with the marketer than some critics want to believe, for as consumer preferences change, a marketer’s behavior will necessarily change to maximize profits (Coors and Winegarden 11). Social capital, used in its most conventional sense, functions as a metaphor for bridging differences between social actors whose motivation for engaging the marketer may not be brand specific. In other words, the potential for discursive engagement emerges over political, environmental, or social issues unrelated to the brand. No doubt, these issues may be addressed by the marketer through marketing communication that announces the company’s work as a good corporate citizen. However, CSR initiatives mean nothing unless the marketer is
willing to work directly with their publics to build the trust necessary for effective stakeholder relations.

Social capital does not discourage branding relationships. It enriches them in the way marketers talk to consumers and other publics. It seeks to build relationships of trust that sometimes can only be achieved by stepping into those public spheres where diverse, unpredictable, and recalcitrant publics are engaged in public opinion that initially works against the core objectives of the marketer. Why? One-way marketing communication tactics are not always the most effective strategy to build the trust necessary for relationships in the marketplace. Marketers often succeed when going beyond one-way message campaigns, but only when they are able to negotiate the political and social will of diverse stakeholders. It can be shown, then, that strong branding today depends on communicating CSR that reflects the will of stakeholders. Marketing communication that relies on more personal and direct communication with stakeholders is essential to build the social capital necessary to negotiate competing interests and opinions that are the core of political and social action with active publics. The case study I discuss in chapter six, on the Shell Corporation in Rossport Ireland, will amplify this point.

**CSR and the Power of the Individual Consumer**

Marketing communication implements CSR initiatives to generate more revenue for the marketer. If this were not the case, the marketer would be throwing money away on advertising and other forms of marketing communication (Coors and Winegarden 11). CSR is inextricably connected to marketers’ efforts to communicate the good work they are doing in the community and the values for which they stand. Arguably, without a marketing communication effort, there would be no need to engage in CSR programs, for
advertising the good work the marketer does is shown to be an essential variable of the branding relationship between the marketer and the consumer. In other words, the branding message is tied to the CSR message and, therefore, the marketing discourse.

If then, as has been suggested, the marketer’s CSR message figures significantly into most consumers’ purchasing decisions, then, branding and CSR are crucial to the marketer’s ability to remain competitive. It is moot to argue that the branding message diminishes the discourse simply because the CSR message is communicated in the form of a commercial advertisement that connects the social value to the brand. You cannot have CSR initiatives without a program of communication, so the communication either serves CSR interests or hinders them. Marketing communication helps the marketer successfully communicate CSR by strengthening the way in which the consumer views the brand. However, branding is not the only concern of the marketer. As has been the focus in this dissertation, an examination of discursive formation puts the emphasis of communication on the rhetorical coordinates that precede civil discourse, i.e., publics, public spheres, and public opinion. The rhetorical antecedents of civil society, furthermore, suggest that the viability of discourse, in a civil society, is linked to participation from its citizens and the degree to which they shape the discourse.

Participation is an important value associated with democratic society and should be part of the conversation when marketing communication is concerned with a civil discourse. CSR in marketing communication, however, has been criticized for lacking the democratic agency upon which social capital depends. Banerjee argues that despite the “rhetoric of democracy and participation” that accompanies normative frameworks of corporate citizenship, such systems remain primarily about “participation from below
imposed from above” (quoting Fine, 24). The problem of discourses on corporate citizenship, social responsibility and sustainability, then, run the risk of being “defined by narrow business interests and serve to curtail interests of external stakeholders” (Banerjee 2). Additionally, Winsor observes that that the notion of corporate social responsibility is antithetical to the principles of democratic equality and citizen participation because marketers are forced to “make judgments about what is best for consumers, and what needs are valid,” that is, social responsibility rests on the assumption that consumers are unable to look out for themselves, therefore, marketers must interpret what is best for society (7).

This criticism is somewhat deflected when considering how shopping has become a form of social justice activism (Micheletti and Stolle). As such, consumers are showing a capacity to “push transnational corporations to take more responsibility for the social side of their policy and practice” (Micheletti and Stolle 750). Boycotts and “buycotts,” such as “labeling schemes and shopping guides for consumer choices,” are two examples (Micheletti and Stolle 752). Because CSR messages enhance a branding relationship, the idea of participation derives partly from the consumer choice to purchase. What effect, then, might this have on the character of public discourse? As much as there is a need for marketers to both commit to doing well in the community and communicate their good work to strengthen their relationship with publics, the participatory role of ordinary people is more effective when they are able to complement their purchasing power with an ability to contribute to discourses that cohere with public need. CSR calls attention to the notion that a society is made stronger when its people recognize an ethic of public good. Participation, as it relates to CSR, emerges from those conversations between
marketers and citizens as they work toward advancing this notion of good. Social capital is the trust that forms over time in discourses where social, political or marketplace values are an important part of the discussion. It is an opportunity to test whether the CSR messages, that are part of a company’s marketing communication, are one with their actions.

In principle, people contribute to the spirit of citizenship that defines democratic society by being part of the discursive formation that shapes both marketplace and civil society. The greater good reflects a pattern of relationships that encourage a public’s participation and the extent to which people are free to become part of the discourse-making process. As Cortes Jr. points out:

Strong decision-making occurs to the extent that we have institutions which enable us to develop social capital and cultivate the habits and dispositions toward the true democratic process. (51)

This is not an ambitious norm of marketplace communication as much as it represents the real rhetorical power of people, particularly in today’s digital culture. In a paper discussing the public interest, regulations and the communications market, Foster calls for regulators to “radically adapt” their thinking in a way that consumers and marketers will co-construct new business ethics for communicating in the digital era:

We will have to learn to rely more on markets than ever before. And we need to rely more on individual consumers and on companies exercising responsibility in those markets, with increasing emphasis on self-regulation and co-regulation. (1)
Foster is essentially raising the question, how can the individual consumer contribute to a civil public discourse? The trend toward CSR coincides with a marketer’s openness to share responsibility for message content. At the heart of this marketing philosophy is the belief that there is value in the individual person communicating with other individuals, sharing resources and information while shaping, not only the marketers’ priorities, but also the way in which they can most effectively communicate with everyday people. In the process, marketers co-construct a communication climate whereby social values become part of the discourse. This means moving marketing communication from message to conversation, thus, emphasizing the way in which people are not merely the receivers of marketing discourse, but also its producers. Marketers, today, reflect the change in the way they are communicating with consumers. In 2006, Richard Edelman, CEO of the Edelman PR company, proclaimed that the “marketing landscape” in which the communications and public relations industry developed was being “knocked down” by the power of peer-to-peer marketing:

Companies and organizations should be willing to yield control of the message in favor of a rich dialogue, in which you learn by listening…Rank and file employees should be seen as a new credible source for information about a company… the consumer will be a co-creator, demanding transparency on decisions from sourcing to new product positioning. (Gillin 128-129)

The notion of participation in the digital landscape is not only a practical concern in the way marketers communicate, but also represents a shift in perspective as well. As proof, over the past couple of years, marketers have had to learn how to adapt traditional marketing communication methods to the proliferation of consumer-populated social
media. The marketers’ attempts to reach consumers in these constantly emerging social/virtual habitats have enabled them to better interpret the communicative power of their publics, thus, encouraging their participation and the development of new spheres for public discourse. PR professional Steve Rubel, for example, set out to create his own social media site as a way of bringing marketers and consumer bloggers together in a virtual public sphere. Rubel’s mission was to “serve as an open forum where all PR pros can learn how micro-media outlets persuade audiences and how to communicate key messages through the blogosphere in this new age” (Gillin 136).

Will the digital era, then, facilitate greater participation, thus, bringing us closer to Habermas’ ideal speech? Probably not! Though it can be demonstrated that the individual consumer enjoys more discursive input today because of the communication technology, a truism pertaining to business, politics, and civil society suggests that only a “vital few” will take advantage of new opportunities to participate. In their research of the “citizen marketer,” McConnell and Huba posit the notion of the “power law” to bracket the degree to which individual citizens might participate in virtual public spheres. Quoting New York University media professor Clay Shirky, McConnell and Huba claim that as a new social trend starts, it seems “delightfully free of the elitism and cliquishness of the existing systems. Then, as the new system grows, problems of scale set in. Not everyone can participate in every conversation. Not everyone gets to be heard. Some core group seems more connected than the rest of us” (38). The “power law” shows that “distribution of action is uneven…not everyone will take up the offer to participate” (Ibid). The fact that there are no assurances that more individuals will contribute to the discourse simply because communication technology makes it easier suggests that participation is really a
qualitative matter. In other words, the participation of ordinary members of society should be framed in terms of power to influence rather than the quantity of participants.

Interestingly, McConnell and Huba’s work on citizen participation coheres with the research on “word-of-mouth” communication by Keller and Berry who contend that only one in ten of the adult population in the United States “make the society, culture, and marketplace run” (1). Though small in number, these “influentials” are “engaged in the national conversation” and act as “strategically placed transmitters that amplify the signal, multiplying dramatically the number of people who hear it” (Keller and Berry 14). The implications of Keller and Berry’s claims on marketer/consumer communication are twofold. First, marketers are challenged to “adjust to this new reality in which word of mouth rules” (Keller and Berry 14). The idea that word of mouth represents the most powerful channel through which consumers communicate supports Hauser’s claim that civil society’s capacity to create itself is a direct result of the vernacular rhetoric of its people (Vernacular).

Successful marketing communication depends upon a marketer’s willingness to explore the discursive dimensions from which consumers shape public discourse and make their needs and interests known. Second, participation by one in ten people does not make the formation of public discourse less civil or democratic. Studies show that “political participation has the form of a pyramid: a lot of people participate little and few people participate a lot” (Curtin and Meijer 116). A democracy ensures conditional freedom for people to express or withhold their opinions publicly as much as they are free to buy or bypass any brand that comes to market. The fact that only a few choose to
participate does not mean that others are not contributing since the “influential” will ultimately bring others into the relevant conversations that bear on the public’s needs.

The issue of the influential member of society, then, addresses the concern that not enough participate when in fact many do through word of mouth, viewed rhetorically, as vernacular talk. Influentials are significant because they represent an opportunity for marketers to understand how the actual communicative practices of a group of people, rather than a demographic category, constitute a dynamic public capable of shaping public opinion. Influentials are the closest model of vernacular rhetoric to be recognized in contemporary marketing literature. Because they resist explanation within the conventional ideology of consumer behavior, there is no methodological framework to manage them, or predict where they might show up, or what they are going to say. In this way, influentials reflect the contingent nature of communication. Marketers cannot isolate the influential, but only understand and interact with them within historically specific contexts of communication, for example, as they develop and express themselves through discourse.

**Defining the Notion of Community**

Does a community of ordinary people and corporate citizens, engaged in a national conversation on social responsibility, represent the essential foundation for a civil public discourse? CSR provides a reason for an ongoing conversation between marketers and members of society who build a public relationship in the process of sustaining a discourse that reflects their needs and concerns. Together, members of society show the potential to form a discourse community when they “initiate action in collaboration with other human beings,” thus, recreating and reorganizing “the ways in
which people, networks of relationships and institutions operate” (Cortes, Jr. 51).

Participation in CSR talk brings both marketer and citizen together in shared recognition that each has a responsibility to the community in which they live and do business. However, it does not represent the ideal discourse that Habermas believes has the potential to democratize communication between ordinary citizens and, for example, marketers. The notion that a community is forged by greater participation is particularly problematic in virtual public spheres. Habermas addresses this concern on the way the Internet community is often presented as the new public forum for democratic discourse. He argues that though the digital era is seemingly open to participation by all, it also threatens to create more fragmentation of a politically focused mass audience into a large number of publics isolated by their own issues, thus, undermining the broader achievement of community-building:

The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. However, computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context. (Habermas, “Political Communication” 423)

Habermas’ point underscores the need to evaluate the notion of community in the context of the way a civil (democratic) public discourse might form. Hauser is helpful here since he is able to show that the meaning of community, and its concomitant democratic discourse, is not determined by agreement as to which issue should take precedence over another, or whether a single space can be developed and used to authorize the kinds of conversations that constitute meaningful discourses. Disagreement is inevitable and “interlocutors need not agree about a specific state of the world but
rather only that they are in the same world” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 66). The notion of community, as a civil arrangement fostered by citizen participation, then, is shaped by our ability “to participate in its conversations” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 67). Furthermore, the vernacular language of those conversations enable people to “share rhetorically salient meanings” (Ibid). Community, as a concern of a body of private citizens participating in social, political and marketplace deliberations, will happen in the process of constructing discourses. The digital environment represents one avenue of valid rhetorical expression that makes sense given the historical conditions of communication and community today. Moreover, Keller and Berry’s research on the “influentials” shows that in spite of scholarly claims of an atrophying social, political and civic life, an increasing emphasis on community is taking place at the grass-roots level:

There’s growing belief that “people have a definite responsibility to help the people in their community who are less fortunate than they are.” In addition, more Influentials say they “have responsibilities to my neighbors and community beyond what is required by law” (84%, up 8), and they think business “should consider what is good for society, not just what is good for profits” (78%, up 10). (192)

The trend toward citizen participation is evident, but it is happening from the fewer, rather than the many, who participate in ways that utilize the strongest resources of community, both political and economic, and the most viable modes of communication. Although CSR can address the social concerns of individual members in a community, it can be argued that ethical public discourse between marketers and ordinary citizens proceeds more effectively through the discourses of those “institutions and values that
weave the fabric of community and democracy” (Cortes, Jr. 50). Consequently, membership in civic, political, or social organizations enable ordinary individuals to “connect to real political power and participate effectively in public life” as part of a discourse community (Ibid).

The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), for example, aims to teach people how to affect social and political change within their communities. The IAF is said to foster those organizations of civil society such as, “voluntary institutions that include religious congregations, labor locals, homeowner groups, recovery groups, parents associations, settlement houses, immigrant societies, schools, seminaries, orders of men and women religious, and others” (IAF website). Community organizations, such as the IAF, help to strengthen the civic culture essential for democratic discourse by re-connecting everyday people to vital institutions of society and the marketplace. In the process of learning to become leaders and participators, people also begin building networks of communication, i.e., the relationships necessary to construct a stronger discourse community concerned with issues that overlap political, social and market sectors. Community involvement at each of these sector-levels shows that CSR includes integrating the corporate brand into projects that call for the participation of ordinary, community members. Partnerships with members of communities hold marketers accountable to how their organizations conduct themselves in the marketplace and the image they project outside company walls (Laff 36). It means that the marketer is showing a commitment to community as well as the environment and their own profitability, i.e., the “triple bottom line” (Ibid).

Marketers today have an opportunity to incorporate such messages into their marketing communication as a means of establishing their commitment to an ethical
public discourse even if it appears to be self-serving. In defense of such marketing communication, Marc Orlitzky, professor of management at Penn State University at Altoona, argues that the real ethics of a marketer’s triple bottom line is grounded in its actions, not its motivation:

Critics will say that if an initiative is self-interested, and the organization benefits from it, then it should not be classified as corporate citizenship…I disagree. They should be judged based on how it benefits society. You can’t judge an organization’s motives, but you can measure outcomes.

(Laff 37)

The notion of the triple bottomline signals, perhaps, how the modern corporate rhetor can more effectively speak and act the truth, thus, reaffirming how ethical discourse represents the intimate bond between what we say and what we do. More importantly, as more communities join the conversation on CSR, the discourse is shaped by a multiplicity of participants creating new opportunities for networks and associations vital to a civil society. The idea of a relationship is grounded in an ethic derived from the quality of a discourse whose aim is defined by its communication participants such as the marketer and its publics. In other words, it seeks an ethos of communication that addresses the ontological possibilities of people in conversation, i.e., linguistically competent subjects “are constituted as individuals by growing into an intersubjectively shared lifeworld” (Habermas, Moral Consciousness 199). This is the role of discourse in shaping human relationships which create the “lifeworld of a language community” reproduced through the “communicative actions of its members” (Ibid). The success of this discourse community in the marketplace and the potential for transforming the ethics
of public discourse “requires more than financial capital, physical capital, or even human
capital: it requires institutions that develop social capital” (Cortes, Jr. 52).

**Building Social Capital in Relationships of Trust**

In the last decade, social responsibility has gained significant currency, and
corporate marketers continue to promote these initiatives as a means to maintain
legitimacy while enhancing financial performance. However, the focus of social
responsibility has changed over the past few years and today the spotlight is “back on the
basic building blocks that create trustworthy organizations” (Waller 48). Is the notion of
trust more important today for marketers to succeed in building their brands and fortify
their reputations in the community? To the extent that big business over the last decade
has had to endure significant public relations challenges, the issue of trust is, perhaps, a
greater concern:

The growing importance of understanding and preventing unethical
behavior in organizations is evidenced by the enormity of its
consequences, from lost savings and retirement funds (Enron), to lost jobs
(Tyco), to precipitous stock declines (Martha Stewart, Inc.), to an
increasing collective distrust of our government and business institutions.

(Giacalone et al, 483)

It may not be enough, however, for a marketer to brand their product alongside a social
value or cause and expect to “bond” with consumers:

In an era of corporate scandal-“the age of anti-trust” futurist Faith Popcorn
calls it—there is the distinct possibility consumers will become so alert to
manipulation that they will develop immunity to it. Worse, they could
punish marketers who step over the line. “At some point,” Bloomberg columnist Lynn wrote, “everyone will get fed up.” It’s up to marketers to figure out where that saturation point is before they reach it, before “it's all about marketing” becomes a mantra of consumer discontent. (Donaton 15)

Communicating CSR initiatives alone is not sufficient to forge a civil public discourse. As shown earlier, stronger branding relationships depend on the consumer’s purchasing power to buy rather than reject the product. In a competitive marketplace, where consumers are more likely to buy a product from a company who demonstrates values that match their own, marketers must establish relationships of trust. Social capital emerges from discourses where a relationship of trust can form. Social capital bridges the discourses of consumers and marketers in a way that reflects the rhetorical antecedents of civil society grounded in a relationship that holds its rhetors accountable. Marketing communication, interpreted as the marketer’s rhetorical enactment of the marketplace, recognizes CSR as an opportunity for discourse with consumers and the possibility that a dialogue can lead to actions that address concerns and issues brought to bear on those that participate in the discourse. Engaging these discourses helps to build social capital needed to sustain civil public discourse.

Marketing communication theory, from a rhetorical perspective, then, expands how human communication can be interpreted in the marketplace and creates greater conceptual leverage from which to show how rhetoric serves as a proper theoretical framework for marketing discourse. For example, as pointed out in chapter four, a dialogizing rhetoric creates a realistic understanding of the way in which marketers can frame the notion of dialogue with publics. Since a dialogizing rhetoric manifests in
multiple forms of communication, marketers are learning to pay attention to and engage consumers using both formal and informal channels of discourse. As such, the possibility for relationship-building in today’s marketplace is becoming a more practicable function of the network of dialogues that are being created by individuals, communities, associations and formal organizations who understand that the marketplace encourages discourses that blend the branding experience with one’s social and political reality. Because marketers embrace the pluralistic nature of our culture, the American marketplace becomes the site for many discursive spheres, and marketing communication means the possibility for engaging many different conversations whose themes take on political, social, cultural, as well as economic significance. In the process of those many discussions, acts of symbolic expression and exchanges, relationships, formed in discourse, create the connections necessary from which a working ethic between marketers and publics emerge, decisions made and actions taken. This is the notion of democratic communication in the marketplace reframed conceptually by Putnam as social capital:

Social capital refers to connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called “civic virtue.” The difference is that “social capital” calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. (Bowling 19)

Putnam was not the first to identify the notion of “social capital.” In fact, the term itself has been used in the social sciences as far back as Hanafin in 1916 and Jacobs in
1961 (Farrell, “Thinking Critically” 32). Yet, it was Putnam’s research on the disintegration of civic and social life in *Bowling Alone* that helped boost current scholarly interest in the concept (Ibid). Defined generally as the “value inherent in social connections and reciprocities,” Putnam emphasizes the role of volunteerism, participation and social contacts, thus, equating social capital with the virtue of civic activity (Farrell, “Thinking Critically” 29). With such an emphasis, it is clear that social capital doesn’t just happen; it has to be created (Putnam, *Better*). Through volunteering, club, and group membership and neighborhood relations, social capital is understood normatively as the glue that binds people together (Farrell, “Thinking Critically” 31). Hence, a discourse ethic emerges in the associations and networks that are created in communication. Social capital is, thus, grounded in discourse, i.e., the talk that happens between marketers and interested publics, the formal and informal ways in which consumers make themselves heard and the ongoing messages that marketers create and express through traditional marketing communication. Together, these discursive elements do not seem particularly unique compared to the way in which marketers typically conceive of building relationships through their marketing communication efforts. The difference, however, is an emphasis on the bond of trust that functions as a strong normative rule in the building of relationships with their publics (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 270).

The normative dimension makes trust a self-sustaining attribute of the relationship in that the bond is as much a matter of trusting as being trusted (Ibid). Trust is a phenomenon of reciprocity (Ibid). Reciprocity, as symmetrical action between a marketer and its publics, is the call to share responsibility of the marketplace as virtuous action in civil society. The notion of “relationship” is bracketed by the terms of creating social
capital. Stoker and Tusinski are careful to frame how relationships, based on an understanding of reciprocity, are to be interpreted in the traditional marketing sense (“Reconsidering Public Relations”). Consequently, they discuss both the limitations of reciprocal relations and caution against how the typical notion of dialogue, featured in much of the popular marketing communication literature, can create a false sense of responsibility undermining dialogic discourses:

Symmetry means that an organization or public can shift part of the responsibility for determining right action to the other party. Thus, instead of increasing an organization’s burden for right action, symmetry may reduce expectations and encourage adapting for the sake of reaching an agreement acceptable to both parties. (Stoker and Tusinski 165)

Social capital in the twenty-first century is born of a burden of responsibility created by an openness to discourses that require marketers and their publics to construct an ethic that suits communication in a global marketplace. A global marketplace suggests that marketers are prepared to engage a diversity of public opinion. Marketing communication is symmetrical to the degree that marketer’s remain open to the way that a public’s opinion may shape its actions. In other words, marketers do not ignore, retreat or withdraw from questions, concerns, or claims raised by even the most antagonistic public. Instead, they address them with honesty and in the spirit of mutual understanding. Such a communication stance does not interfere with marketing goals, for the idea of trust in this relationship is somewhat self-serving, i.e., one builds a trust relationship to achieve its self-interested goal. Social capital, then, becomes necessary for marketers to achieve their marketing goals when a public may contest their actions. In a marketplace
comprised of many public spheres, as is the case with the global marketplace, there is the likelihood that marketers will experience the competing rhetoric of an oppositional public. The idea of a civil public discourse, in the marketplace, is not to abandon one’s marketing goals to accommodate the opposition, but rather to engage the rhetoric of the opposition with the aim of co-constructing robust civil discourses:

Before we can have a productive civic conversation with difference, as Dewey envisioned, we first must overcome the menace of difference that provokes distrust and the antidemocratic rhetoric of intolerance, or cynicism and withdrawal from the political process. For democracy to be a functional form of governance in a society of strangers, citizens must learn how to engage difference in a way that recognizes the individual and the group as a subject. (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 271)

The success of these engagements depends on the trust relationship created by social capital. In search of such an ethic that fits today’s “knowledge-driven society,” Thomas describes a marketplace where social capital is its primary communication ethos:

Successful economies are underpinned by social relationships that help people to collaborate…Networks of social relationships create social capital. The ethic of trust and collaboration is an important one in the new economy. (“Thoughts On”11)

By arguing that a network of social relationships provides the core of social capital, Thomas is essentially locating Hauser’s theory of the reticulate public sphere within Putnam’s notion of social capital in the marketplace. The legitimacy of the marketplace, as a discursive arena for civil discourse, is shaped by marketers creating “social
solidarity” with concerned publics (Ibid). And, since the social capital model “stresses the importance of social or interpersonal trust in enabling the local or voluntary participation that strengthens community relations,” the quality of public discourse improves as marketers recognize the viability of public opinion to shape a host of issues and concerns regarding the marketplace and society (Livingstone and Markham 353). The marketplace is a discursive space, or more accurately spaces, for the kind of civic, political, and social engagement reserved, in theory, for a traditional understanding of the public sphere. The marketplace functions as a site for reinvigorating a public identity where consumer expression and political expression are united often by participating in a company’s marketing campaigns. One current example, known as the Red Campaign, has generated tens of millions of dollars for social and environmental causes through the purchases that consumers make on brands like American Express, Gap, and Motorola. The Red Campaign professes not to be a charity, but rather a “simple idea that transforms our incredible collective power as consumers into a financial force to help others in need. Red is where desire meets virtue” (JoinRed Website).

The integration of political discourse with consumer branding is not unique to the contemporary marketplace, nor does it, as some critics claim, reflect a new level of consumerism. Examining Adam Smith’s rhetoric of the market, Kalyvas and Katzneler argue that Smith, often credited as providing the seminal justification for the commercial marketplace in his Wealth of Nations, actually conceived of the marketplace as the modern “institutional equivalent of ancient public spaces with which citizens of the classical polis, through speech and deed, struggled for recognition” (553). The
marketplace, thus, functions as a social space for proper integration and order into civil society (Ibid).

The marketplace encounters a perspectival shift when marketers engage with people on issues that combine the interests of marketing with the interests of society. In other words, the marketer invites marketing opportunities that derive from communication where discursive themes and forms are introduced and co-managed by consumers. The substance and direction of marketing discourse is, thus, open to change as new publics emerge to communicate their opinions in a variety of discursive arenas in the marketplace. This discourse is framed by marketers today partly because of CSR and the commitment to the triple bottomline, i.e., environment, economy, and society. When the marketplace is, thus, seen as constitutive of CSR speech and rhetoric, its viability as a foundation for building social capital, through the discourses of rhetorically engaged publics, is more apparent. The marketplace is transformed by the rhetoric of its publics and its function is shaped by participating in the variety of discourses that its publics bring to bear on the marketplace. Hauser sees this phenomenon as essential to the way in which rhetoric changes society and the workings of its institutions:

Economic, historical, and institutional factors play important roles in the shape and direction that typify a given society…social actors grapple with them as among those impulses that bear on transforming society and its institutions. The catalytic agency for such transformations is society’s discourse, and the resource most essential for discursively penetrating social consciousness of what is, what ought to be, and what might be is its symbols. (Vernacular 114)
Hauser is essential, then, to show how social capital can be understood communicatively once the rhetorical features of society are employed as an interpretive framework. For example, social capital in the marketplace is a product of the discursive actions of marketers and publics. As Hauser demonstrates, the possibility for social action, that meets with CSR initiatives, is located in and through the rhetoric of its actors (Ibid). The rhetorical exchanges of marketers and their publics are not only the “bases for shared awareness of common issues” and shared interests, but also reflect an openness to a variety of public opinion (Hauser, *Vernacular* 64).

Relationship-building, like the notion of dialogue, is simple enough to write into a marketer’s communication plan, but the terms lack clear referents to help frame their meaning, e.g., what kind of relationships are possible with our publics? How do we define the nature of the relationship? As mentioned earlier, social capital works on a principle of relationships, however, the concept more closely reflects a bond that is not fully articulated in the literature that discusses marketing communication and relationship-building. This is perhaps one of the reasons why social capital works better as a concept in marketplace settings rather than the uncertain use of the term relationship-building found throughout marketing communication research. Putnam’s empirical evidence that describes social capital as “relational work,” for example, provides a richer understanding of what kind of relationship is possible when businesses build relationships (*Better Together*). Using UPS as an exemplar of the “connectedness and coherence” that contributes to social capital, Putnam explains the company’s ability to develop an historically appropriate ethic characterized by those attitudes displayed in its everyday work approach:
UPS is surprisingly hospitable to face-to-face conversations…Every day all around the country drivers meet at lunchtime in parks and parking lots to talk, mixing social conversation with work…Hub and center managers are out on the floor, talking with the people they supervise…District and regional managers spend much of their time traveling…shaking people’s hands, asking them about their work and talking directly to them. (Better 212)

And since work can “affect social capital outside the workplace,” the company aims to cultivate a “social capital landscape” that extends back into the community outside of the workplace (Putnam, Better 208). UPS managers, for example, are expected to perform community work as a means to “learn about the lives of potential UPS employees and customers by being there, listening to people speak for themselves, and working with the programs and agencies that support them,” thereby becoming aware of key life issues that affect their publics (Ibid). Putnam’s example of UPS demonstrates how social capital is shaped by relations that are situated in an ongoing conversation between both corporate and community rhetors who continuously seek to co-construct their social and economic commitment in a civil economy.

As marketing communication aims for long-term relationships (Swystun and Oakner, Peltier et al., Dewhirst and Davis), the rhetoricality of the marketplace demonstrates how relationships are grounded in the historical moment in which discourse is formed and expressed. Therefore, when social capital is framed rhetorically, it is clear that the goal of long-term relationships do not accurately reflect the communicative possibilities of public discourse. Since publics, as Hauser has argued, “exist only as they
manifest their publicness,” it is impractical to believe that cultivating a permanent bond with a marketer’s stakeholders is possible, for a public’s “awareness of issues is not philosophical but eventful” (Vernacular 64). The trust that bonds the public, then, and the social capital that is developed would seem to fade as the public and its particular discourse dissipates.

This is a concern of Cohen who questions the viability of social capital on universal grounds echoing some critics’ dismissal of Habermas’ notion of universalizable communicative rationality. Cohen finds that Putnam’s analysis of social capital “fails to explain how the trust produced within voluntary associations becomes generalized; that is, how intergroup trust becomes trust of strangers or institutions outside the group” (“American Civil Society”). Interpersonal trust, Cohen argues, is by definition, context-bound, that is, people trust because of repeated interactions in specific contexts that cannot be “transferred” to other contexts (Ibid). Cohen’s objection raises an important question on how social capital is sustained across different communities. However, when the interactions of communicators are conceived of rhetorically and locally, rather than objectively and universally, the question of how social capital comes to benefit all discourse communities seems not to be the issue. The trust and reciprocity that are essential to the creation of social capital will exist as long as the conversation between marketers and its publics reflect the actions taken to address the exigencies that brought the communicators together in discourse initially.

In other words, because situation becomes a key defining characteristic of rhetoric, social capital, as a discursively-created relationship, is also constructed in given communication situations through the rhetorical practices of those participating in the
discourse (Bitzer “Rhetorical Situation”). Such a discourse shapes the norms and expectations of social capital. Hauser views this as the basis for relationships between communicators in the public sphere:

Rhetorical practices and social will are the outcomes of historical agencies, which is to say groups and classes, who share a social field and are attempting to define that field’s nature and meaning…behind official visions of reality lies the fact of relationship as the defining condition of those who share a social field. (Vernacular 118)

As Hauser, suggests, relationships, constructed of discourses, are transitory in nature which further complicates the viability of strategic long term relationship-building through marketing communication. Social capital works as a principle of relationship-building, but only when considered as a product of historically-grounded discourse. Once it is admitted that social capital is a discursive construct, where trust and reciprocity are defined by the situational responses and actions of communicators, the need to maintain it in perpetuity, or duplicate it across institution and organization, is uncertain. The emergence of social capital is the result of a commitment to the act of ethical discourse that is constructed and re-constructed when situations present themselves. It is a communication ethic that appears in the rhetorical nature of public spheres whose common good is realized in the process of enacting civil public discourse:

The rhetoricality of the public spheres…are the loci for discussion of the sort that seeks common judgment among an interdependent aggregate of strangers who share in matters relevant, in principle, to civil society.

(Hauser, Vernacular 64)
Social Capital as the Bridge to Civil Public Discourse in the Marketplace

Hauser’s theory of rhetorical society, when applied to the marketplace, shows that relationships are possible, but temporal. The meaningfulness of those relationships is situated in context-specific discourses shaped, ideally, by the embodied speech of its rhetors. Accordingly, the relationship is defined by trust and reciprocity, that is, social capital. Social capital, however, does not constitute a permanent bond, but more likely reflects a communication ethic experienced as trust when word and deed are one.

Because the notion of social capital gained traction in the scholarship as a result of research that corroborated the belief that American communities were collapsing under a “disrespect for public life” (Putnam, *Bowling 17*), the function of relationship-building in the marketplace can be understood in those terms Putnam laid out on civil and public life, i.e., the public good. Though invoking the notion of the public good as a panacea for social and civic atrophy is as common as the post-classical, cynicism that many critics show toward the concept, public good, framed in the context of civil public discourse, provides a principled communication objective for marketers and their publics as they build social capital together:

The social capital model stresses the importance of social or interpersonal trust in enabling the local or voluntary participation that strengthens community relations, thus, feeding a virtuous circle of civic engagement.

(Livingstone and Markham 353)

As marketers increasingly demonstrate a commitment to issues that cross economic, political, and social boundaries through their CSR programs, the grounds for a civil public discourse are cultivated as they prepare to listen and engage members of
society whose concerns and interests bear on their corporate conscience. The production of a civil public discourse depends not only on the commitment of marketers, but on the extent to which members of society participate in the making of that discourse. As discussed in chapter four, public opinion formation is a key rhetorical process of civil society and a necessary communicative component of civil public discourse. Marketers dedicate their communication budgets to identifying and shaping public opinion while many in society struggle to have their opinions heard in conventional public spheres. These forms of communication represent, perhaps, the ongoing contest of many marketing discourses and the continuous public response to accept or reject their meaning and significance. Though the message and media may be different, these communication actors form a marketplace community whose social bond is determined by the ethics of their discourse:

The language chosen in communicating with these various stakeholders either helps to forge bonds of community, or it erodes community, infecting it with a generalized distrust… (MacKenzie 28)

The notion of trust is further problematized in a civil society because of its emphasis on relations of mutual dependency:

As conditions that bind us to partners who are marked by difference increase in scope and complexity, we lose our capacity to understand the basis for our partners' actions or their level of commitment to common goals. (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 267)

While the pluralistic nature of the marketplace can be viewed as an impediment to the building of trust inherent to social capital, a rhetorical understanding of society helps
to explain how social capital is created through those non-formal discourses expressed in the opinions of diverse publics. In other words, it is easier to conceive of the creation of social capital when opinions are expressed directly, immediately to rhetors as is the case in interpersonal and, or formal speech occasions such as meetings, conferences, deliberative decision-making in small groups and face-to-face events among the many possible examples. However, how is social capital the product of the broad range of non-formal discourses typically executed in the everyday communication contexts and dispersed conversations of ordinary people? This question presumes that both formal and non-formal discourses can contribute to and shape public discourse in ways that satisfy the conditions for a more than less civil society.

Because Putnam emphasizes the social connectedness that happens when people are in conversation with one another, the cultivation of social capital is often located in those associations that coalesce people over common concerns or interests (Bowling, Better Together). The dialogue that defines the purpose of such coalitions is infused with the opinions of its members who seek to participate in a public discourse on matters of social and civic importance. The Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC), for example, is a non-profit association of parents, educators, and doctors. Two years ago, the coalition began a public campaign urging breakfast cereal marketers to promote the importance of a healthy diet and lifestyle. Though concerned about losing market share to its competitors, cereal companies, after extended negotiations, agreed to alter their marketing communication to children. As a measure of good faith, each marketer set its own individual advertising standards (Teinowitz “Kellogg Move”).
The implication of this example is that the “building of social capital is not free of conflict and controversy” (Putnam, Better 3). However, such a characterization is consistent with the notion of a democratic public sphere where opinions emerge and meanings are negotiated as part of a “contested arena” (Rutherford 274-275). For this reason, Putnam distinguishes between “bonding social capital,” i.e., exclusive social networks linked by people who are similar in crucial respects, and “bridging social capital,” i.e., where networks are constitutive of difference and diversity (Better 2-3). Discursive processes such as negotiations with marketing organizations often echo social capital of a “bridging” nature. Relations may be discordant, but ultimately cooperative. Putnam admits that community-building does not always produce a “warm and fuzzy feeling” that some might infer as an inevitable condition of social capital (Better 3). Borrowing a term used in the research of Michael Woolcock, Szreter argues that a more appropriate description of this connection between marketer and public is “linking social capital,” for such a relationship is defined by “parties who know themselves not only to be unalike, as in the case of bridging social capital, but furthermore to be unequal in their power and their access to resources” (579).

Linking social capital coheres with Hauser’s interpretation on the character of public spheres, as pointed out earlier, in that they are the “locus of emergence for rhetorically salient meanings” (“Civil Society” 21). Through the expression of competing claims and different interests, diverse rhetorical cultures co-construct discourses in the process of building social capital (Wilson and Eberly 425). The competing interests, the differences in economic or social standing, access to resources and degree of political clout, while relevant determinants to the force of one’s discourse, might encumber social
capital, but it does not prohibit it. Such is the nature of democratic civil society when understood as a “web of rhetorical arenas in which strangers encounter difference, learn of the other's interests, develop understanding of where there are common goals, and where they may develop the levels of trust necessary for them to function” (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 271). While ample evidence exists on the potential to develop social capital between corporate rhetors and formal “opinion-forming” associations, the capacity for everyday citizens to build social capital with marketers is often advanced by participation in the “secondary associations that constitute the web of civil society” (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 272). These relationships are built from the everyday rhetorical practices, expressions, and engagements of a diverse people. As such, social capital is also created when exposing members to “alternative rhetorics” which reflect “the range of difference and the mediating grounds of similarity that make it possible for them to form a civic community” (Ibid).

Since civil society consists of many public spheres, consumers and marketers exercise their role as citizen rhetors as they engage the array of formal and vernacular discourses that constitute the marketplace. To engage these rhetorics not only means that consumers are capable of contributing to civil public discourse, but to do so requires the “trustworthy voice” of marketers (Ibid). Trust is constructed in the communicative act of defining the meaning(s) of our rhetorical exchanges. PR professionals and consumer/citizen bloggers demonstrate one way in which meaning is negotiated in an evolving, uncertain medium as is the case with the use of different forms of social media. In the marketplace, however, meanings likely to have rhetorical salience are those which “produce solutions that interdependent partners regard as acceptable for their own
reasons” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 79). Social capital does not require, then, that rhetors arrive at a consensus, but in spite of differing perspectives can co-construct a space for ongoing and open discourse. The process of creating social capital is itself a communicative process where rhetors maneuver to establish cooperative relations in the act of participating in formal and vernacular discourses that aim toward the production of a civil society. Chapter six examines the quality of actual discursive practices of marketers and their publics using those rhetorical norms necessary to form a civil public discourse in the marketplace.
Chapter 6: The Norms of the Rhetorical Marketplace

The Metaphor of Civil Economy

In 1996, The Body Shop published the results of a communication audit designed to report on the company’s social performance. The audit, consisting of detailed survey feedback, stakeholder quotes, and company responses to the data, highlighted the interests and concerns of its key publics. Its purpose was to create accountability through a dialogue that would build mutual understanding and trust (Zadek 191-192). The Body Shop is a well-known exemplar of a major marketer working to initiate a civil public discourse. Such a discourse arises from both an awareness and commitment to the rhetorical conditions that shape communication in a civil economy which include; recognizing key publics as they present themselves, opening up to the many discursive arenas in which these publics address relevant issues, and engaging the questions, arguments and ideas that publics express as opinion including ordinary talk. These are essential rhetorical conditions for civil public discourse in the marketplace and reflect the basis for dialogic interaction with publics. The Body Shop’s attempt at a “structured dialogue” represents how CSR initiatives can be integrated with marketing communication objectives to shape deliberative engagement with publics (Zadek 192).

The example, however, is equally significant because the company’s effort to forge a formal dialogue coincides with the “ongoing, more cut-and-thrust conversation” that often characterizes public discourse in the marketplace as well as in other public spheres (Ibid). Today, marketing professionals seek dialogue through those opportunities for both formal and informal conversations with their publics. The notion of “conversation” is a working metaphor for marketers whose marketing communication
programs aim for dialogue with those publics as they present themselves in discourse. By way of example, in a recent article in *Advertising Age*, Freddie Laker proclaims that modern marketing has failed to grasp the essence of branding success for the twenty-first century, i.e., “truly great campaigns…enable long-term sustainable conversations” ("Creating Sustainable"). As marketers frame the marketing communication process through the metaphor of “conversation,” effective communication will depend upon their capacity to approach their publics with a recognition and alacrity of the rhetorical nature of discourse in the marketplace.

This means that marketers must understand how marketing communication practices can initiate and respond to the talk of their publics regarding cultural, social, political, and economic issues. The marketplace and, therefore, marketing communication today reflects a concern that traditional branding campaigns must be adapted to the plurality of discourses comprising the marketplace. Marketers are challenged to consider the efficacy of integrating social/political values with a brand message to sustain a dialogue with its publics. A dialogic marketing communication means that marketers identify the real issues of its publics from the opinions they express and respond to them in a way that helps create a discourse of civil engagement. Rhetoric in the marketplace, then, provides a viable framework from which to understand those norms that constitute a civil public discourse. Consequently, if we ask the question, how can we best understand civil discourse in the marketplace? The answer would frame the marketers’ need to initiate a “reasonable, legitimate, and feasible” conversation within the “organic” dialogue emerging from the way publics express opinions (Zadek 194). These conversations can be initiated by marketing communication programs intended to
evoke consumer talk about a marketer’s brand. Often today though, opportunities for conversation are initiated by ordinary citizens who seek information about a brand, promote the brand on their own private website or blog, or publicly critique the organization prompting marketers to react and respond in different discursive arenas.

The purpose of chapter six is to demonstrate how those rhetorical norms of civil society, described by Hauser, are functioning in marketplace communication to guide civil public discourse between marketers and their various stakeholders. To do this I will analyze the case of global marketer Shell Oil Corporation in Rossport Ireland and make the following points, first, the notion of a civil economy provides a workable model from which to conceptualize public discourse in the marketplace. Second, marketers who effectively engage in meaningful dialogue will do so when they understand how to read the rhetoric of those with whom they communicate. And third, the chances of improving public discourse in the marketplace will depend upon the marketer’s ability to embrace rhetoric as the basis for deliberative communication leading to relationships of trust with key publics. A rhetoric of marketing communication, then, contributes to civil public discourse as marketers recognize the reality of how opinion is expressed in the marketplace and respond to those publics to create sources of social capital.

The rhetorical marketplace is a contested, public space constituted by many public spheres, and, thus, many issues that overlap into social and political discourses. Some of these issues deal with the conventional planning and execution of marketing communication, e.g., creating a dialogue about the brand while other issues flow from a marketer’s public commitment to corporate citizenship such as working with people to improve the community in which they live and where the company does business. As
marketers engage communication within these spheres, they interact with consumers who, in the process of forming public opinion, exhibit the characteristics of rhetorically-competent publics. Dialogue in the marketplace is realistically understood as both competing and cooperative rhetoric between marketers who are challenged to effectively utilize marketing communication to further the conversation with their publics, and people who respond to and shape rhetorical situations for productive, yet, sometimes agonistic communication with marketers. As previously discussed, the benefits of an open, historically situated discourse help form the basis for validating claims of social or public responsibility, encourage public participation, and define opportunities and limitations for social capital that shape ethical discourses in the marketplace.

Understood in its most conventional terms, the marketplace suggests the space and pace of society’s economic activity. It is where marketers sell their goods and services and publics buy and invest in them. The marketplace, however, has been experiencing a change in character precisely because the place and pace of economic activity has become increasingly challenged. This change is driven by more competition, evolutionary communication technology, and the expansion of the marketplace abroad among the more salient factors. Companies are learning that the successful marketing of their brands require an openness to engage those issues that derive from participating in competitive, global markets and the discourses that emerge from them. The realities of the marketplace today, then, draw attention to issues that characterize discourse in civil society. Davis et al. describe this transformation of the marketplace into a “civil economy:”
The civil economy is not a singular invention so much as a frame of reference allowing us to connect the myriad dots of individual developments bubbling up in international enterprise… Constitutional and accountable political institutions supported by political parties, an independent judiciary, a free press, impartial law, civic bodies, and an involved citizenry are the core sustainers of democracy in a civil society. (15)

The notion of the civil economy works here as a metaphor to highlight the marketplace’s interest in developing relationships with members of society “whom they share bonds of mutual dependency, mutual concerns, and a mutual need to cooperate for the common good” (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 266). Civil economy situates the marketplace in the associational networks that define civil society which are formed by discourses concerning three distinct yet interrelated domains: economics, politics, and morals (Ibid). The discursive anchors of civil economy resemble those of democratic societies. Civil public discourse in the marketplace is the product of those conversations between marketers and their publics, from shareholders to members of a community, who deliver civil judgments that reflect on the marketer’s capacity to cocreate the grounds for democratic economy. Civil judgment demonstrates the potential for public opinion to shape the direction of a marketer’s communication and, thus, the meaning of public discourse as they work together to maintain a strong economy within a democratic, civil society:
We see the market potentially transforming into a civil economy by means of the circle of accountability, which is all about how citizen investors are steadily clearing conduits to influence. (Davis et al. 16)

If the idea of civil economy represents the integration of social responsibility and bottomline profitability, then, marketers are poised to understand how ordinary people actually communicate the “type of society to which they wish to belong” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 157). The marketer who is attentive to the principle of a civil economy may ask those questions that help them to look at the world and think about what they are doing as an ethical rhetor in a diverse marketplace such as; do we harness the ability to educate people about issues and problems that are relevant to them and not us? Is what we do engaging them in positive and meaningful ways? (LeFebvre 42). Such questions demonstrate an interest in those discourses that help shape a civil economy. The notion of “civil,” as a condition for marketplace discourse, however, does not prescribe a particular decorum for conversation, but rather reflects the role of marketer and consumer who confront the uncertainties in a global marketplace through discourse. This can be illustrated in those coordinated efforts by marketers to support the community, to holding marketers publicly accountable to their mission, to working with marketers to improve their brands. All of these discursive possibilities perpetuate a discourse that recognizes how active publics and marketers, committed to treating their publics ethically and responsibly, can improve public discourse.

The civil economy also works metaphorically to describe a marketplace where responsible action is the embodied rhetoric of marketers. The demonstration of word and deed in the marketplace shows a marketer’s commitment to ethical praxis and forms the
basis for relationships of trust. Civil economy is rooted, then, in the discursive similarities found in the Athenian *ecclesia* and *agora*. As Hauser points out, both the “Athenians and Romans recognized political, legal and communal realities as rhetorical achievements” (*Vernacular* 113). Logically, the marketplace is a product of the same rhetorical achievement, i.e., since rhetorical discourses constitute the order and meaning of political and social reality, so too does it create the structure for economic reality. It follows, then, that “markets and persuasion do not inhabit separate realms” (Kalyvas and Katznelson 569). In both the political and economic spheres, rhetors engage in a form of public recognition seeking the esteem and praise of their interlocutors and audiences (Kalyvas and Katznelson 553). Though historically the content of rhetoric differed from marketplace to political arena, today marketers, because of their triple-bottomline mission, find themselves participating in public conversations that place them in the interrelated discursive domains of economic, political, and moral issues. This does not require marketers to devalue the role of branding as part of their marketing communication. In fact, their brands are often the discursive mechanisms used to encourage such conversations:

> It’s important that we find some meaningful human truth in the things we market. In doing so we allow people on both sides of the fence to create a dialogue, not just between brands and consumers but ultimately between consumers and other consumers. (Laker, "Creating Sustainable”)

The rhetorical marketplace, then, shows how the *agora* merges with the *ecclesia*. If we retain the classical origins of these terms, the meaning of a rhetorical marketplace suggests that “arête,” or civic virtue is demonstrated through consumers’ participation
with the brand in a way that reflects their ability to contribute to social and political discourses. Consequently, the rhetorical marketplace is shaped by local political and social rhetoric as a practical concern in marketing communication. The conversations that marketers are having with their publics are discursive opportunities to demonstrate those political and social commitments that can be integrated with the branding of its products and services. And as marketers acknowledge their viability, communication contexts are created that expose marketers to the rhetorics of their publics. The information revolution characteristic of civil economy, for example, fosters one opportunity for marketers and everyday people to engage in constructive discourses:

Shareowners have learned to focus on the quality and competence of the information moguls on whom they rely, and which before they had taken for granted. Perhaps, inevitably, if new capitalists now pay attention to who provides them information and how, they inevitably next want to know what information they really need to fulfill their ownership responsibilities and grow value. (Davis et al. 145)

**Rhetoric as a Foundation for Dialogue in the Marketplace**

The marketer’s brand is the heart of its marketing communication programs and marketers are routinely integrating brand messages with appeals to social, environmental, and political values. This has been the case recently with Starbucks whose social rights narrative of “free trade” is indistinguishable from the coffee retailer’s brands. Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz has said that the marketer is “beginning to tell a story not about products but really talking about the soul and the conscience of the company. We have a keen interest in making sure that our customers and the marketplace understand the social responsibility part of our business” (“Starbucks Ads” 16). Campbell’s soup, as well, has
redesigned their iconic label to bring attention to, and perhaps propel, a public conversation on breast cancer prevention. CSR initiatives are proof that competitive marketing today depends on forging a dialogue in a way that addresses important values for living that further a marketer’s associational bonds with its publics. By doing so, the marketplace, as an integral part of civil society, reflects the “free space in which democratic attitudes are cultivated and democratic behavior is conditioned” while emphasizing civil associations as the “highest form of expression” (Barber 6). Discursive processes form this civil, democratic union. In addition, a democratic civil society features a marketplace where a marketer’s speech and actions are one. Ethical agency is, thus, subject to the range of critical publicity in the marketplace. As such, a marketer who makes a public commitment to the well-being of people, the environment, and society, is not only admitting a responsibility to act as a good corporate citizen, but is also opening itself to accountability and the scrutiny of its publics. In other words, marketing communication can be looked upon as a public test of integrity for, “if one’s positions and messages have integrity, they will either withstand public scrutiny or react, respond, and correct themselves in light of opposed positions and messages” (Farrell, Norms 305).

Marketing communication, then, is both an opportunity to demonstrate the marketer’s ethos and lay the communicative groundwork for dialogue. Dialogue, in the rhetorical marketplace, is the ongoing conversation that deals with issues and concerns that reflects the values of their publics and invites marketers into a discourse on how those values may contribute to society and, consequently, contribute to the way a marketer can successfully brand their products. As Hauser shows in Vernacular Voices, civil society’s vernacular rhetoric characterizes a public’s contribution to this discourse.
Therefore, the talk of consumers will affect the way a marketer negotiates the integrity of their marketing communication. When the Microsoft Corporation, for example, recently pulled their sponsorship from Fox network’s Family Guy, because of negative publicity on the show’s jokes on deaf people, the Holocaust and incest, the company was taking a public stand on the ethics of their marketing communication programs (Learmonth, “Microsoft Shocked”). In doing so, Microsoft acted from an IMC principle to consistently communicate a message about their brand in such a way that reflects both its values and those of their publics. Yet, the company’s actions also show a willingness to sustain an openness to criticism necessary to build a rhetorical forum from which “normative expectations of integrity” can emerge (Farrell, Norms 305). The persistence of such a rhetorical forum frames marketing communication as part of an “episodic sequence” in which publics can ascertain the integrity of a marketer’s claims over time (Ibid). Thomas Farrell’s notion of the rhetorical forum shows how the marketplace functions as a public sphere providing a space for multiple discourses to encounter one another and advance, shape and provisionally judge issues, interests, positions, constituencies and messages (282). Engaging these discourses is a marketer’s ongoing effort at dialogue with those publics that have a stake in the actions of marketers and can shape the public discourse.

A dialogic marketing communication, then, suggests two realities of the rhetorical marketplace, first, marketers may communicate more effectively when embracing the rhetorical conditions and practices that form civil society, and second, as marketing communication encompasses the rhetoric of the marketplace, civil discourse is created when publics can trust marketers to follow-through on espoused values. When those
values are shared by both marketer and public, the bond between them is grounded in the integrity of the word and not simply the persuasiveness of the message. For that reason, civil public discourse seeks an ethics of engagement with people and announces “who may appear in public, what may be said and done, and which relationships may form” (Hauser, Vernacular 113). Dialogic marketing communication, that works within the norms of the rhetorical marketplace, acknowledges and responds to those discourses that show the way people communicate from the rhetorical pillars of civil society, i.e., their publicness, public spheres, and public opinion to forge a civil conversation. In addition, competing narratives and the subsequent conflict of interpretations and values help frame marketing communication as part of an ongoing rhetorical process. If marketers seek to engage their publics in conversation, they must develop the ability to understand how those conversations are shaped rhetorically:

Movement through the discursive spaces opened by these dialogues
requires skill at reading conversations that have recourse to different modes of vernacular expression if not different but nonetheless understandable tongues. (Hauser, Vernacular 106)

The case of Shell Oil in Ireland, also known as Shell E&P Ireland Limited (SEPIL), illustrates the elements of a public discourse that emerge as a series of discursive episodes indicating whether the company followed through on their claims to a new program of dialogic engagement. We can evaluate the degree to which a meaningful dialogue can be constructed between marketers and their publics by understanding the rhetorical elements of the episodes as they develop over time. While the episodes center on SEPIL’s efforts to construct a gas pipeline off the coast of Ireland, some brief
background information on the company’s commitment to become a corporate leader in the sustainable development community is helpful. In the late 1990’s, Shell announced that they were revising their business principles as a pledge to sustainable development and human rights (Livesey 314 -317). At the core of this new mission was a more open communication approach from which to build a dynamic public discourse on sustainability. Shell’s marketing communication efforts were marked by an ongoing public communication program including roundtables, discussion forums and other communication activities designed to engage different people through both a public conversation on sustainability and a process of social reporting:

We have published these reports in order to bring our business practice into line with our principles; moving towards an open and transparent measurement of how we match up to our own expectations and those of our stakeholders. It is our belief that robust long term business performance is only achievable if we behave in a way which takes fully into account our broader responsibilities to society. In this context our intention is not only to communicate our values and business principles to our stakeholders, but also to demonstrate that we live up to them in our business practices. The publication and public distribution of these Shell Reports and our HSE Reports is another demonstration of this accountability. (Shell Press Release, “Profits & Principles”)

In addition to processes for more open communication, Shell adopted a dialogic decision-making structure characterized by three communication goals: communication, clarity, and credibility (Livesey 325). It is argued that Shell’s re-orientation toward dialogic
praxis became a benchmark for other companies at the end of the twentieth century (Ibid).

The key events that created the grounds for discursive encounters between SEPIL and their publics began in October of 2004 when the oil company was granted permission to construct an onshore gas terminal in Bellanaboy, County Mayo connecting via pipeline to the Corrib gas field just off the coast of northwest Ireland. Subsequently, Shell announced that work at the proposed terminal site would begin immediately. In April of 2005, proceedings were instituted in the High Court to “prevent residents obstructing the construction of the gas pipeline at Rossport” (Shell to Sea Website, “Timeline”). Consequently, the High Court granted Shell the “right to access private lands in the village for the installation of the pipeline” (Ibid). Two months later, five residents from Rossport were jailed for contempt of court by “refusing to obey the High Court injunction not to interfere with the construction of the Corrib gas pipeline” (Ibid). These local men, dubbed the “Rossport Five,” became the symbol of growing resistance to Shell in Ireland.

In August, the Irish government, “in response to safety concerns expressed by members of the local community,” appointed international consultants, Advantica, to “conduct an independent safety review of the onshore pipeline” (Shell Website, “Key Milestones”). Shell followed up by announcing “its decision to temporarily suspend work on the pipeline to allow for a period of public discussion and dialogue. This suspension was to allow the company to address remaining public concerns” (Ibid). In September, Shell petitioned the High Court to have the injunction dropped and the “Rossport Five” were freed from prison. In May 2006, the Advantica group released their findings and recommended that Shell limit pressure in the onshore section of the pipeline. A mediator
appointed by the government reported, in July, that “a clear majority of people in Rossport, the wider Erris area and Co. Mayo are in favour of the project” and, following a recommendation from the mediator, Shell “agreed to modify the route of the onshore section of the Corrib gas pipeline to address community concerns regarding its proximity to housing” (Ibid). Work resumed at the Bellanaboy terminal in October and the activist group Shell to Sea expanded their efforts to contest the building of the pipeline. Shell to Sea describes itself as a group of community members, unaffiliated with any political party or organization, whose sole purpose is to “ensure the proposed Corrib gas terminal and pipeline are constructed offshore” (Shell to Sea Website, “About Us”).

From these events, we can identify the rhetorical antecedents that shape the grounds for deliberation and dialogue. The basis of a civil public discourse is, thus, evidenced by the discursive encounters in which Shell engaged its key publics. It is possible to ascertain, then, whether the company lived up to its commitment to social responsibility by forging an ongoing conversation among diverse publics with whom they share bonds of mutual dependency, concerns, and a need to cooperate for the good of the community (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 266). In other words, was Shell successful in developing the associational bonds with its publics necessary to build relationships of trust? More so, since Shell publicly committed to a more open communication approach with its stakeholders, a fair question to gauge civil public discourse is whether a meaningful dialogue was sustained on a divisive and controversial public issue. Meaningful dialogue reflects the formation of civil public discourse and the degree to which Shell negotiated the rhetorical conditions that shape effective communication within the marketplace.
The discourse changed as Shell became more aware of how the contingent nature of communicating in a reticulate public sphere bears upon the way speakers must engage one another to be viewed as ethical. The force of vernacular rhetoric significantly shaped Shell’s ability to negotiate the discourse in the midst of emerging contingencies. Initially, Shell appeared to welcome the public discussion and dialogue that ensued after they received permission from the Planning Board of Ireland to commence construction of the gas pipeline in the fall of 2004:

We welcome the fact that public scrutiny and input is an essential part of the Irish planning process, which has been very thorough. We believe that this decision will enable the public to have full confidence in the project. We look forward to working with the local community as the development progresses. (Shell Press Release, “Shell Welcomes”)

The company was able to successfully engage many local residents including landowners along the construction route and gain support of the project as well as secure access to the land (Shell Press Release, “Contempt of Court”). Shell developed a network of associations with people in the community early on by employing local workers and offering business opportunities to local contractors and suppliers (Shell Press Release, “Working With”). For example, Rossport resident Fiona Togher, who was hired by Shell to be a social investment advisor, stated that she would not have “carried on working for the company if she were not convinced of the benefits to the local community” (Anstiss, “Gas Fuels Heated”).

However, as Shell began to encounter greater scrutiny, the value of their commitment to meaningful dialogue and their ability to forge relationships of trust was
called into question. When a group of concerned citizens showed up at SEPIL headquarters in Dublin to deliver a “single-page statement quoting the U.S. government standards for ‘safe distances’ for homes near high pressure, domestic-quality gas pipelines,” Shell refused to meet with them (Indymedia, “Corrib Gas”). Although this rebuff was not proof of a company retreat from meaningful dialogue, it prefigured the key episodes that would shape Shell’s capacity to engage in a civil discourse as they entered the public domain. Shell’s ability to sustain meaningful dialogue was complicated by the company’s petition for a High Court injunction allowing them to freely enter the private properties of seven landowners who previously refused Shell access. In June of 2005, three of the landowners and two retired schoolteachers were arrested for violating the injunction. This group, dubbed the Rossport Five “became overnight celebrities in a country that loves a rebel” (Washington Post, “On Irish Coast”). Even though Shell stated in a press release on June 29 that they had “undertaken numerous efforts to meet with and reach agreement with this small number of landowners for access arrangements,” its decision to resort to the courts is “now seen, even by company officials, as counterproductive” (“On Irish Coast”). The imprisoning of the men increased mobilization for their support at home and abroad, and the Rossport 5 became the symbol of the ongoing Shell to Sea campaign in Ireland.

Shell deviated from their corporate commitment to work from a dialogic framework in two ways: by seeking a court injunction against its most volatile public represented by Shell to Sea, and, ultimately, failing to “have a better understanding of local thinking” (Ibid). The notion of “local” here has metaphorical significance. Just as local politics is often thought to potentially cultivate better deliberative practices and
dialogue, an understanding of local values, traditions, as well as local narratives was an essential starting point for Shell to initiate the discourse. Marketing communication, shown in early public statements, tended instead to preach the doctrine of expertise:

We have worked closely with many experts in the submission of the planning application to ensure the project incorporates the highest technical and health, environmental and safety standards. (Shell Press Release, “Shell Welcomes”)

As Livesy points out, such a discourse can appear to disregard the dialogic qualities that enable a speaker to more fully attend to the local attitudes and beliefs that facilitate associational bonds:

Environmental impact statements published by governments and sometimes by private businesses tended to promote an expert rhetoric that instrumentalized the relationship between people and resources and competed with discourses based on spiritual and moral understandings of nature. (318)

If Shell was to fulfill its own mandate for dialogic engagement, the company would need to embrace the cardinal virtue of effective public communication: know your audience. Analysis of the “local” would have initially revealed not only the character of the Shell to Sea group, but also the reasons they advanced to justify their entry into the discourse. The incarceration of the Rossport Five changed the minds of many residents who had previously supported the pipeline construction as a guaranteed boon to the local economy. Many came to believe that the project was “socially, environmentally, and economically unsustainable, in that it endangers lives and livelihoods, ploughs through
special areas of conservation and serves to impoverish the Irish people of their natural resources” (Angel, “Niall Harnett”). Oppositional publics emerged from picketing, rallies and placarding as well as the placing of pickets on Shell or Statoil petrol stations around the country (Leonard 89). Rallies were also held throughout Ireland that “drew thousands of people who wished to express their concern about the imprisoning of the five men. Shell's terminals were also the target of organised [sic] blockades” (Ibid). Internet communication expanded Shell to Sea’s capacity to create new public spheres from which interested local, national, and international publics could express their opinions and engage in virtual public debate:

A national petition was organized and thousands of people put their signature or e-mailed messages of support to the Shell to Sea website. This website (www.corribsos.com) provided the campaign with a powerful tool in the highly computer-literate Ireland in the new millennium. Grassroots bloggers and activist websites such as Indymedia and Ireland from Below gave prominence to the campaign and links between protestors across the globe were established via the internet. (Leonard 89-90)

These interactions point to the collective reasoning process that is inherent in the way a public develops and expresses public opinion as rhetorical dialogue in the marketplace (Hauser, Vernacular 93). In doing so, Shell to Sea and its supporters exercised a legitimizing “publicness” which was given traction by the expression of a narrative situating the past in future calls for discursive engagement. Hauser, appropriating Ricouer, views this as the significance of the “space of experience” in the construction of meaningful narratives (Vernacular 111). The notion of “space” is not
only the functional place where rhetors struggle for position in a rhetorical situation, but it also suggests, reflectively, that “our past always contains something foreign to us to be overcome and that how we overcome it-how we traverse its space-depends on the itineraries we choose for our journey” (Ibid). Experiences past provided the primary interpretive lens through which the people of County Mayo framed invitations for dialogue and discussion with Shell:

With the commencement of the laying of a gas pipeline through the heartland of the Erris coastline in North Mayo the underlying psyche which has its roots in prior rural collective action was resurrected. The resulting “Shell to Sea” campaign witnessed the mobilization of rural sentiment in addition to something far more “visceral” in the words of Mark Garavan… (Leonard 80-81)

Shell was challenged to embrace the significance of the prior struggles of their publics. The discursive power of the Rossport 5, and subsequent creation of public support, had more to do with the way Shell to Sea recreated historical sentiment than with the call for social justice. Hauser attributes the capacity for a public to gain recognition, and therefore, persuasibility, in part, to its sense of historicity which, through its use of narrative, “entails acts of selection and emphasis on which self-understanding is based and which provide the resources to invent publicness. It is a rhetorical accomplishment” (Vernacular113). The issue of narrativity is important in the discursive domain because it helps to explain how publics form, express their opinions and “evoke bonds of communal understanding and sympathy that can frame common commitments and motivate common actions” (Hauser, Vernacular 112). The important issue for Shell became
whether dialogic bonds could be established in the future given the local community’s collective memory of the past. Yet, Shell did not need to invent a new model of dialogue to forge dialogic bonds, but rather come to recognize that its best resource for civil engagement was understanding and responding to rhetoric’s place in the marketplace. Shell’s 1998 social report claimed to show the company’s public commitment for improved communication with its publics, yet, this would not happen, in the case of SEPIL, until the company made rhetoric the focus of their dialogic efforts. The practical issue facing Shell was how to effect a discourse of civic engagement in the middle of a contested public sphere. Arguably, Shell could have minimized public opposition had it discovered the local narratives of its primary publics and integrated its lessons and values into its marketing communication.

**Forging Civil Public Discourse in the Case of Shell**

In theory, a discourse of civic engagement presumes a commitment to the communication capacities of deliberating publics (Hauser and Benoit-Barne). Three conditions sustain a discourse of civic engagement including: civil society’s grass roots resources, the problem of building and maintaining trust and a focus on the rhetorical practices in civil society’s public spheres as the basis for social capital (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 262). In addition, since “publics deliberate in ways not confined to the orderly debates of parliamentary bodies,” a group’s vernacular rhetoric is an essential contribution to civic engagement (Hauser, *Vernacular 92* and Hauser & Benoit-Barne 266). Shell’s encounter with grass-roots organizing represented an opportunity for the company to test its commitment to dialogue and build a network of associations with those stakeholders willing to demonstrate public support of the company’s energy
projects in Ireland and abroad. However, the longer that Shell supported the court injunction, the more difficult it became to gain the trust of key publics. As a result, the company enabled the most outspoken grass-roots group, Shell to Sea, to shape the tone of public discourse by engendering more public opposition, e.g., gaining the endorsement of unions, community and religious groups to support the protest, encouraging people to attend the national Shell to Sea speaking tour as well as inviting those interested to Rossport to learn more about the issue (Leonard 90). An understanding of the viability of a public, as it develops and expresses opinions rhetorically, would have enhanced Shell’s position from which to more effectively engage stakeholders. As pointed out earlier, Shell would not only have understood the local attitudes of the people expressed as the community’s narrative, but it would have also discovered the key terms from which to communicate their position and negotiate the trust needed for meaningful dialogue. Though a vocal activist public emerged as Shell to Sea, many local residents supported the pipeline construction initially if the company could do so with the greatest attention to “safety.” The issue of safety, then, became another common value driving public discourse:

There is a visceral horror of the industrial complex at Bellanaboy Bridge and the dangers of a gas pipe explosion” (Grant and Domokos, “Fuelling”).

As early as 2002, the planning board of Ireland provided the substantive reasons for public concern by concluding that Rossport was the wrong site from the perspective of “minimizing [sic] environmental impacts and sustainable development” (Leonard 86). This was a theme consistently recreated in the vernacular rhetoric of Shell to Sea who
embraced the discourse of “the dangers and risk posed by the pipeline” (Leonard 87). Arguably, Shell was prepared to run a marketing communication campaign to promote a discourse encouraging public support of the new pipeline, but it was not prepared to respond to the claims initiated by those publics who emerged outside of the traditional public spheres of communication. *Shell to Sea’s* campaign made SEPIL aware of the function of vernacular communication in the process of creating a rhetorical dialogue from which public opinion forms. The organization’s ability to foster other publics in diverse public spheres brought “serious attention to street-level give-and-take of contrary viewpoints from which a widely shared strong opinion may emerge” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 89).

Shell learned that dialogic engagement meant inviting the participation of its stakeholders. Furthermore, participation in a democratic economy is not only deliberative, but also depends on reading the rhetoric of its interlocutors:

The act of interacting with fellow citizens on matters of mutual concern may begin with self-interest, but as anyone who has participated in such a discussion knows, pluralism precludes the possibility of personal preferences carrying much weight with discursive partners whose interests and assumptions aren't necessarily the same as their own. At this point we move into the realm of rhetoric where our concerns become focused rather quickly on finding arguments that will make sense to our partners…. Inventing arguments that will make sense to someone else requires that we consider the issue from that person's point of view. (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 264).
Hence, skill at interpreting the vernacular rhetoric of stakeholders was essential for Shell to engage in dialogue. Through organized rallies, silent protests and concerts, to the opening of an arts center dedicated to framing the debate in art and culture, the proponents of *Shell to Sea* illustrated an important dialogical feature of the rhetorical marketplace, participation in the public realm does not require authorization to speak in a traditional public sphere:

> From the formal speech to the symbolically significant nonverbal exchange, from practical arguments to aesthetic expression. These exchanges are part of an ongoing dialogue in which active society critiques, negotiates, associates, and ultimately constitutes its interests and opinions on the issues confronting them. (Hauser, *Vernacular* 91)

Hauser’s description emphasizes the role of vernacular discourses in the creation of civil society. Because *Shell to Sea* effectively penetrated traditional public spheres, for example, by maintaining ongoing contact with the media and press, distributing DVDs, and getting radio stations to play protest songs written about the issue, the campaign was able to create an important public space that emphasized the ordinary discourse of people (Leonard 90). Moreover, the notion that vernacular talk contributes to the rhetorical constitution of society demonstrates that the marketplace is a site for civic engagement as publics express their opinions in ways that transcend traditional political discourse. Civic engagement arises from rhetorical dialogue “conducted in a montage of settings and with a variety of partners who, in some way, are linked in civil society” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 106). The capacity, then, to “link” with key publics aids the formation of associational bonds necessary to effectively engage public opinion and demonstrate public trust.
Vernacular discourse is a valuable source of public opinion. Because of the influence of *Shell to Sea* on the capacity for ordinary people to participate in the discourse through vernacular talk, Shell learned to change their analysis of key publics from preconceived notions of what they might say, to the communicative functions discovered in the range of discursive exchanges among those who were engaged by a public problem (Hauser, *Vernacular* 109). The sum total of the publics’ vernacular rhetoric constituted a form of public opinion that Shell could not ignore. Each expression contributed to the relevant public conversation and helped define Shell’s public response to the issues, thus, shaping the way marketing communication could be utilized to address the concerns of publics manifested as civil judgments. Consequently, once Shell realized the power that ordinary people exhibit through vernacular rhetoric, they were in a better position to manage it and affect a more positive public discourse. In this way, marketing communication can be conceived of as a form of ethical communication management in which the marketer builds the necessary associations with local publics that lead to relationships of trust in the community.

When Shell proposed to build the gas pipeline along the coast of West Ireland, they had not anticipated the centrality of rhetoric to the way their publics would develop and express opinions and the influence those opinions would have on creating more spheres of influence. Shell’s marketing communication began to shift to a dialogue shaped by the rhetorical conditions that permit civic engagement when they announced in August of 2005 that they would postpone laying the offshore pipeline for the Corrib gas project until 2006. Shell’s action helped to reframe the discourse by first recognizing the emergence of key publics and then co-constructing a public space with the most agonistic
publics in order for disagreements to be heard. Shell, thus, acceded to “open a space for disagreement” as a way of engaging those publics who would rather have seen Shell pack up and leave than stay and work toward mutual understanding (Hauser, *Vernacular* 152).

The idea of a civil public discourse guides rhetors to confront differences, not from a compelling need to agree, as is Habermas’ claim with his notion of consensus, but rather a willingness to construct a dialogue that admits a common understanding of those differences. Such a conversation is rooted in a shared appreciation for the disagreements that characterize the discourse and the argumentative space to communicate them. The nature of this conversation encourages dialogic partners to understand that “they inhabit a common world of concerns that requires them to take account of one another while arriving at judgments” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 101). If a framework for meaningful dialogue exists, it is grounded in the “we” that is at the core of dialogue in the space of disagreement between rhetors rather than the indulgence of one communicator to another who works from a strategy of accommodation (Hauser, *Vernacular* 152). This interpretation on the function of dialogue seems to contradict the prevailing wisdom of the marketing concept, e.g., analyzing the needs of customers/publics and satisfying those needs.

However, communicating in the rhetorical marketplace today necessarily anticipates that discourse is shaped by social and political issues that create competing interests and a growing network of publics who will respond to the ubiquity and force of marketing messages with their own discursive force and persuasibility. Incorporating the standpoint of a “we,” as opposed to presenting itself as the expert “I,” reorients the marketer to accept the agonistic nature of public spheres and enact their role as an ethical
interlocutor when claims are made. Civil dialogue depends on “language that is understood, even by those whose views and yearnings do not coincide, and that projects a world shared in some meaningful way” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 152). Dialogue, in the rhetorical marketplace, clearly then, amends the proceduralism associated with formal deliberative discourses, such as Habermas’ communicative action, when marketers interpret and respond truthfully to the rhetoric of publics as a central condition for dialogic engagement.

In September of 2005, Shell had their injunction lifted by the court. The move signaled the company’s refocused effort to move from a defensive position to proactively creating the social capital necessary for building relationships of trust. Being trusted is not only an important part of social capital (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 270), but it is a precondition to establishing the kind of dialogic relations that Shell had been working toward with their publics in Ireland and other parts of the world. Trust, is an achievable goal when considering that the creation of social capital is ultimately a rhetorical construct. Each possible contact between communicators increases the chance to build social capital (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 268). The discourse-based perspective of Shell, since the release of the Rossport 5, indicates a kind of “concession” that is necessary to build trust within the network of reticulate publics characterized by a diversity of opinions, some favorable and some not (Ibid). Concession is not accommodation, for Shell never retreated from their business goals in Ireland. Concession functions as a kind of listening in which the marketer seeks to understand the moral issues before communicating. Conceding to one’s publics, as a matter of building trust, then, reflects a moral link, “obliging the trusted party to adhere to the expectations expressed by being
trusted” (Ibid). The call to trust, then, creates the grounds for a moral discourse where the relationship that develops reveals the reciprocity germane to social capital:

Trust relationships and their robustness are as much a matter of the receiving side, the trusted, as of the providing side, the truster. (citing Offe, Hauser and Benoit-Barne 270)

Arguably, Shell was not prepared initially to engage the people of Rossport and their supporters in a public discussion on the viability of their sustainable development project in Ireland, nor did they fully apprehend the role of vernacular discourses in shaping a public dialogue on their actions and the *Shell to Sea* response. Livesey claims that Shell’s “vision of sustainability” was initially “grounded in discourses of economics” (332). If true, Shell’s openness to dialogue, early on, was constrained by a “profits with principles” attitude whereby the company privileges only those discourses with stakeholders who can immediately affect the financial bottomline (Zadek 54). Such a stance reveals certain taken-for granted assumptions about the purpose of corporate citizenship including the view that the “construction of business” should remain mostly apolitical (Livesey 331). Dialogue with the small group of protestors would unnecessarily lead Shell into a sociopolitical space of dissension that could undermine their economic interests (Livesey 316).

This changed, however, as the company realized that in a sustainable society it could not stand above the all too public fray (Zadek 41). However, as noted earlier, the trust that comes from social capital facilitates political relations in the future (Hauser and Benoit-Barne 270). When Shell committed itself to broaden stakeholder dialogue, including the members of the Rossport 5 and their supporters, the company, according to
Livesey, entered into a more “explicit engagement in processes that were necessarily political” (33). The company’s call to dialogue was an acknowledgement of its publics’ capacity to impose its political will through vernacular discourses:

We are never going to solve the problems we have in Rossport, if we are constantly arguing with each other. There is a mediation process in place, which the five men from Rossport have stepped out of at the moment. I call on them to resume talks so that they themselves and Shell can sit down face-to-face and start working out a solution to this problem. The company is fully committed to addressing the genuine concerns of the local community… It’s about time we took some of the heat out of this problem and started talking constructively - dialogue is the only way forward. (Shell Press Release, “Shell Comments”)

Shell’s shift in communication strategy to an interpretation of dialogue, grounded in public discourse, reflects the rhetorical character of the marketplace in two ways. First, because rhetoric is inclined toward political talk, the lesson for marketers is that social capital will emerge from discourse that infuses the marketer’s actions with the political and social needs of its publics. Moreover, trust relationships are created with those who participate in discourse that invoke political discussion, for “those who take more actions in relation to an issue of importance to them were more likely to be higher in social capital and political efficacy and they were more likely to talk about issues with others” (Livingstone and Markham 364). And second, individual acts of public discourse represent a readable “text” from which marketers may gain greater insight into critical public opinion (Hauser *Vernacular*). This is often reflected in consumer behavior through
“purchase and boycott, public letters, letters to public officials, speeches, symbolic acts, demonstrations, votes, strikes, essays, uses of public places, attendance at public meetings, graffiti and an assortment of other forms of approval or disapproval” (Hauser, *Vernacular* 107). These vernacular discourses gain in public influence by identifying the narratives in which they are embedded (Ibid). The proper role of marketing communication is to interpret vernacular rhetoric as participation in the ongoing conversation that reflects their public’s dialogic capacity.

When dialogue and trust are a marketer’s communication aims, the company need not capitulate their business interests and marketing goals to satisfy the demands of a recalcitrant public such as *Shell to Sea*:

> It is unreasonable to deem companies to have failed if they are in fact doing all they can, and yet still cannot effect significant change or create noticeable social and environmental benefits. (Zadek 136)

It was not until several crucial discursive episodes after Shell received permission to construct the pipeline, however, that the company began to see that marketing communication initiatives designed to promote a major public undertaking would not be as persuasive without reading, responding and engaging the many discourses that would shape public opinion on the project. Discovering the rhetoric of their publics, then, enabled Shell to achieve the communicative openness needed to build a meaningful dialogue and affect the discourse in a favorable manner. As Farrell points out, rhetoric not only “provides an important inventional capacity for the conventions, emotions, and cognitions necessary for affiliation in a community of civic life,” but it also deals with questions that a rational approach does not always consider (*Norms* 76).
The questions then, that Shell needed to discover earlier on were, what is the narrative that drives this public? What is their history? What is the truth they seek? How best can we represent ourselves with integrity? Once Shell embraced a rhetorical standpoint that addressed the particular issues brought to bear by emerging publics, they were better positioned to work toward the social capital that builds relationships of trust. Since 2005, the emphasis of Shell’s marketing communication efforts have focused on the community impact of the project and the company’s Social Investment Program (Wilkinson, “Email to ECCR”). Provisions of this initiative include the “Corrib Gas Partners 3rd Level Scholarships scheme for four local secondary schools” (Ibid). In addition, Shell, “with the aid of representatives from local development agencies,” has been working to establish an Independent Community Investment Fund for Erris (Ibid).

The case of SEPIL shows that the rhetoric of ordinary consumers, in addition to the traditional marketing concept, works as a viable ground from which to meet dialogic goals with diverse publics. As the basis for civil discourse, “publics form through bonds of association” (Hauser, Vernacular 187). When Shell responded to the most robust of these publics, they began to “forge links” to those engaged in other discursive arenas (Ibid). Consequently, the space of the public sphere expanded and permitted even the most oppositional publics to become part of the dialogue:

It is because of this constant engagement and our very broad range of relationships that we have with members of the local community that we are confident that the majority of people in the local area support the project (Shell Website, “Working with the Local Community”).
Ultimately, SEPIL symbolizes a case for civic accountability. However, the key issue is the way accountability was fulfilled by the company. When the notion of marketing communication means that a marketer will integrate public actions with its public commitment, the company can present a more persuasive case to its publics and build the social capital necessary for relationships of trust. Social capital, however, does not constitute a permanent bond, but more likely reflects a communication ethic experienced as trust when word and deed are one. Does civic accountability mean that Shell should have approached all possible publics at the planning stage with their intended actions? Should local government have alerted residents of Shell’s plans once they were known? Or, does civic accountability mean that in a free market economy, the burden of disclosure is shared? Are citizens, then, presumed to have a responsibility to remain aware of the actions of marketers in their community and initiate a discourse with them, other citizens and, perhaps, local government that would raise questions, compel arguments, and contribute to a public exchange of ideas which ultimately clarifies the marketer’s intentions? To what degree should the marketer make this happen? Do they initiate the discourse? Not always. Marketers should, however, remain open to and engage the conversation that some citizen publics want to have, thus, helping to shape the conditions for civic engagement.

This is not an accommodating position. Such a position would only weaken the marketer’s reputation, shift the marketer away from its business goals, and encourage other groups to seek favor from the marketer. Moreover, accommodation attempts to discourage the discourse by reducing a public’s motivation to press claims (Hallahan 51). In other words, accommodation does not encourage the kind of relationship that creates
social capital—it merely provides the appearance of a benefit to appease opposition. It does not build trust. Marketers demonstrate the capacity to build trust by opening themselves to the critical publicity of those publics who exercise their communicative freedom in a civil democratic society by asking questions, raising concerns, and finding arguments, i.e., joining marketers in a public reasoning process that is, at its core, deliberative and takes place in many discursive arenas, some formal and some vernacular. This is the framework for meaningful dialogue that contributes to a civil discourse in the marketplace.
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