Chapter 24

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THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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IT IS A COMMONPLACE TO ASSERT that public communication lies at the heart of the democratic process; that citizens require, if their equal access to the vote is to have any substantive meaning, equal access also to sources of information and equal opportunities to participate in the debates from which political decisions rightly flow. I want to argue that it follows that changes in media structure and media policy, whether these stem from economic developments or from public intervention, are properly political questions of as much importance as the question of whether or not to introduce proportional representation, of relations between local and national government, of subsidies to political parties; that the policy of western European governments towards cable TV and satellite broadcasting is as important as their attitude towards the development of a United Europe; that the FCC's policy towards broadcast regulation is as important as the question of States' rights and that politicians, political scientists and citizens concerned with the health and future of democracy neglect these issues at their peril.

II

However, political theory has largely neglected the implications of such a position and, in particular, has neglected the problem of how, materially, the institutions and processes of public communication are sustained. It has ignored the specific ways in which a given social formation may provide those resources.

I argue elsewhere that our inherited structures of public communication, those institutions within which we construct, distribute and consume symbolic forms, are

undergoing a profound change. This change is characterized by a reinforcement of the market and the progressive destruction of public service as the preferred mode for the allocation of cultural resources; by a focus upon the TV set as the locus for an increasingly privatized, domestic mode of consumption; by the creation of a two-tier market divided between the information rich, provided with high-cost specialized information and cultural services, and the information poor, provided with increasingly homogenized entertainment services on a mass scale; lastly, by a shift from largely national to largely international markets in the informational and cultural spheres. Symptoms of this shift are the expansion of new TV delivery services such as videocassette, cable and direct broadcasting satellite under market control and on an international basis; the progressive deregulation and privatization of national telecommunication monopolies; the shift of Reuters from a general news agency to being largely a provider of specialized commercial information services; the increased penetration of sponsorship into the financing of leisure and culture; the move, under the pressure of public spending cuts, of educational and research institutes (such as universities) towards the private sector; proposals to make profitability the criterion for the provision of public information through such bodies as the Stationery Office, the Ordnance Survey and the US Government Printing Office; the shift in the library service (in the US at least) away from the principle of free and open access to public libraries towards access to proprietary databases on a payment-by-use basis. All these are examples of a trend to what has been dubbed, usually by those in favour of these developments, the Information Society or Information Economy. This trend represents an unholy alliance between western governments desperate for growth and in deadly competition with one another for that growth, and multinational corporations in search of new world markets in electronic technology and information goods and services. The result of this trend will be to shift the balance in the cultural sector between the market and public service decisively in favour of the market, and to shift the dominant definition of public information from that of a public good to that of a privately appropriate commodity.

What are the implications of these developments if we accept the argument that channels and processes of public communication are integral to the democratic process?

III

The debate about the political function and effect of modes of public communication has traditionally been carried on within the terms of the dichotomy between Hegelian State and civil society. The dominant theory within that debate has been the liberal theory of the free press, which has either assumed that the market will provide appropriate institutions and processes of public communication to support a democratic policy or, in its stronger form, argues that only the market can ensure the necessary freedom from State control and coercion. The critique of this position has been able to collect impressive evidence of the way in which market forces produce results, in terms of oligopoly control and depoliticization of content, that are far from the liberal ideal of a free market-place of ideas. But the strength of the

hold that liberal theory still exercises can be judged by the inadequacy of proposals for press reform generated by the Left and the weakness with which such proposals have been pursued. For the Left itself remains trapped within a free press model inherited from the nineteenth century. The hold of this model is also illustrated by the way in which no equally legitimate theory has been developed to handle the dominant form of public communication, broadcasting. The public service, State-regulated model, whether publicly or privately funded, has always been seen not as a positive good but as an unfortunate necessity imposed by the technical limitations of frequency-scarcity. Those on the Left who are opposed to market forces in the press nonetheless have given no more than mealy-mouthed support to public service broadcasting. They have concentrated their critique on the question of the coercive or hegemonic nature of State power. Seeing the public service form as either a smokescreen for such power or as occupied from within by commercial forces, they have concentrated on criticizing the inadequacy and repressive nature of the rules of balance and objectivity within which public service broadcasting is forced to operate. The Left has, therefore, tended to fall back either on idealist formulations of free communications given no organizational substance or material support, or on a technological utopianism which sees the expansion of channels of communication as inherently desirable because pluralistic. Both positions are linked to some version, both political and artistic, of free expression: thus the long debate and campaigns around Channel 4, the touching faith in cable access, Left support for 'free' or 'community' radio and so forth. Alternatively the problem has simply been postponed until after the take-over of State power.

In my view the implications of current developments are better understood, and an escape from the bind of the State/market dichotomy as well as from the hold of free press theory and the necessary accompanying re-evaluation of public service is better served, by looking at the problem from the perspective of the theory of the public sphere.

IV

The theory of the public sphere, as articulated in particular by Habermas, argues that, just as the participatory democracy of the Athenian agora depended upon the material base of slavery, so it was the development of competitive market capitalism that provided the conditions in eighteenth-century Britain for the development of both the theory and practice of liberal democracy. It did so by making available to a new political class, the bourgeoisie, both the time and material resources to create a network of institutions within civil society such as newspapers, learned and debating societies, publishing enterprises, libraries, universities and polytechnics and museums, within which a new political force, public opinion, could come into existence.

This public sphere possessed the following key characteristics. It was protected from the power of both Church and State by its access to the sustaining resources of a wide range of private individuals with an alternative source of economic power. It was in principle open to all in the same way that access to the market was open to all, because the cost of entry for each individual was dramatically lowered by the

growth in scale of the market. The public sphere thus took on the universalistic aspects of the Hegelian State, membership of the public sphere being coterminous with citizenship. All participants within the public sphere were on terms of equal power because costs of participation were widely and evenly spread and because social wealth within the bourgeoisie was evenly distributed. It was distinct from the private interests that governed civil society on the other hand because, in the Enlightenment tradition, it obeyed the rules of rational discourse, political views and decisions being open not to the play of power but to that of argument based upon evidence, and because its concern was not private interest but the public good. It thus also took over the rationalist aspects of the Hegelian State.

Habermas went on to argue that the public sphere – this space for a rational and universalistic politics distinct from both the economy and the State – was destroyed by the very forces that had brought it into existence. The development of the capitalist economy in the direction of monopoly capitalism led to an uneven distribution of wealth, to rising entry costs to the public sphere and thus to unequal access to and control over that sphere. In particular the rise of advertising and public relations has embodied these trends since they represent direct control by private or State interests of the flow of public information in the interest, not of rational discourse, but of manipulation. At the same time these developments in the economy led to related development by the State, which itself became an active and major participant in the economy, thus coming to share the private interests there pursued. At the same time the State was called in, by those class forces which wished to defend and expand the public sphere against the encroaching power of private capital, itself to provide material support, for instance through the provision of public education, public libraries, systems of public cultural subsidy and so forth. In addition the growth of the State's role as coordinator and infrastructural provider for monopoly capitalism led to the massive development of State power as an independently administrative and bureaucratic interest, distinct from the rationalist determination of social ends and of the means to those ends in that political realm guaranteed by the existence of the public sphere. Thus the space between civil society and the State which had been opened up by the creation of the public sphere was squeezed shut between these two increasingly collaborative behemoths. In Habermas's words:

> The liberal model of the public sphere . . . cannot be applied to the actual conditions of an industrially advanced mass democracy organized in the form of the welfare state. In part the liberal model had always included ideological components, but it is also in part true that the social pre-conditions, to which the ideological elements could at one time at least be linked, had been fundamentally transformed.
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> (Habermas 1979)

Habermas wishes to distinguish between the set of principles upon which the bourgeois sphere was based and which, in the fight against feudalism, it brought into existence on the one hand, and the set of institutions which embodied those principles on the other. For Habermas, while the forms in which they are embodied will vary, the principles are the indispensable basis of a free society. These

principles are: general accessibility, especially to information, the elimination of privilege, and the search for general norms and their rational legitimation.

The set of concrete institutions within which public opinion is formed, which include the media of public communication, elections, publicly accessible courts and so on, are distinguished from the State, although the legitimation of the democratic State lies in its role of guarantor of the public sphere through law.

Public opinion, in turn, is to be distinguished from *mere* opinion as presupposing the existence of a reasoning public.

The centrality of these principles for Habermas derives from his more general concern with 'undistorted communication'. Pursuing the tradition of critical theory Habermas has sought concrete grounds for the validation of critical social judgement and for the claims to human emancipation. He has attempted to ground truth claims in the social sciences upon what he has called the Ideal Speech Situation. He argues that human interaction, the field of meanings and values, presupposes language and exists in language. He goes on to argue that we can therefore discover within the structure of speech itself the essential grounding presuppositions of all human interaction and thus of all social organization. He argues that every time we speak we are making four validity claims, to comprehensibility, truth, appropriateness and sincerity, which in their turn imply the possibility of justifying those claims. Thus claim to truth implies a social context within which factual claims about external nature can be validated by evidence and logical argument, while claims to appropriateness, that is, to the social right to make the statement, imply a social context in which social norms can be rationally debated and consensual agreement arrived at. In actual societies characterized by differential power relations and resource distribution such conditions do not hold, and we are thus in the presence of 'distorted communication'. But for Habermas the essential human attribute of speech provides the ground for an ideal society against which existing societies can be judged and found wanting and to which we can aspire (Held 1980; Habermas 1982).

Thus the concept of the public sphere and the principles it embodies represent an Ideal Type against which we can judge existing social arrangements, and which we can attempt to embody in concrete institutions in the light of the reigning historical circumstances.

The strengths of this concept (to which we need to hang on tightly) are that it identifies and stresses the importance for democratic politics of a sphere distinct from the economy and the State, and thus helps us to escape from the elision of the two to which I pointed earlier, as being one of the major blocks to the formulation of a democratic response to current developments in the media.

Another strength is that the concept identifies the importance of rationality and universality as key moments in any democratic political practice and holds out a proper resistance to the reduction of politics either to the clash of power, in particular class interests, or to questions of State administration. It forces us to remember that in politics universal ends are always at issue, as are choices between incompatible public goods, which cannot be reduced to differences of material interest. Thus on the one hand the concept of the public sphere challenges the liberal free press tradition from the grounds of its materiality, and on the other it challenges the Marxist critique of that tradition from the grounds of the specificity of politics.

V

I want now to return to my starting point and look at the implications of the concept of the public sphere for the debate on the structure and function of the mass media. In doing so I shall focus upon broadcasting and upon the public service model of broadcasting as an embodiment of the principles of the public sphere. Such a focus is a conscious corrective to the more normal focus in debates about the media and politics upon the press, and upon a free press model derived from the history of print communication.

The great strengths of the public service model, to which we need to remain loyal through all the twists of the argument that has raged around it, are twofold. First it presupposes and then develops in its practice a set of social relations which are distinctly political rather than economic. Second, it attempts to insulate itself from control by the State (which, as is often forgotten, is not synonymous with political control). Reith's original vision was undoubtedly drawn from the tradition of the Scottish Enlightenment and, within the very narrow limits within which the economic and political forces of the time allowed him to operate, the early practice of the BBC (as Scannell and Cardiff's recent research shows) made a noble effort to address their listeners as rational political beings rather than as consumers (Scannell 1980; Cardiff 1980). It is easy to argue that the agenda for debate and the range of information considered important were hopelessly linked to a class-based definition of the public good. It has been further contended that the BBC's venture into class education was doomed to failure because public aspirations were already so moulded by the consumerist ideology secreted by the dominant set of social relations in society, that this alternative set (as the experience of Radio Luxembourg demonstrated) could be imposed on listeners only by the brute force of monopoly. But this is to miss the point of the enterprise and its continuing importance as both historical example and potential alternative. After all, one could use the same argument (indeed people are already using this argument in relation to the power of local government) that because of declining voter turn-out one should simply abolish elections.

For the problem with liberal free press theory is not just that the market has produced conditions of oligopoly which undercut the liberal ideal, or that private ownership leads to direct manipulation of political communication (although it does). The site of the problem is the fundamental contradiction between the economic and the political at the level of their value systems and of the social relations which those value systems require and support. Within the political realm the individual is defined as a citizen exercising public rights of debate, voting, etc., within a communally agreed structure of rules and towards communally defined ends. The value system is essentially social and the legitimate end of social action is the public good. Within the economic realm on the other hand the individual is defined as producer and consumer exercising private rights through purchasing power on the market in the pursuit of private interests, his or her actions being coordinated by the invisible hand of the market.

Once we recognize this irresolvable contradiction then the analytical task becomes one of mapping the interactions between the two spheres, and the political task one of working out the historically appropriate balance between recognizing,

on the one hand, that pursuit of political freedom may override the search for economic efficiency, while on the other, that the extent of possible political freedom is constrained by the level of material productivity.

The field of the mass media is a key focus for this contradiction because they operate simultaneously across the two realms. A newspaper or a TV channel is at one and the same time a commercial operation and a political institution. The nature of the largely undiscussed problems this creates can be illustrated if one points to the elaborate structure of law and convention which attempts to insulate politicians, public servants and the political process from economic control – rules against bribery, laws controlling election expenditure, the socially validated objection (however often venality occurs) against the use of public office for private gain. And yet at the same time we allow what we recognize as central political institutions such as the press and broadcasting, to be privately operated. We would find it strange now if we made voting rights dependent upon purchasing power or property rights; yet access to the mass media, as both channels of information and forums of debate, is largely controlled by just such power and rights.

But the incompatibility between the commercial and political functions of the media is not just a question of ownership and control, important as such questions are. It is even more a question of the value system and set of social relations within which commercial media must operate and which they serve to reinforce. For it is these that are inimical, not just to one political interest group or another, but to the very process of democratic politics itself. Political communication is forced to channel itself via commercial media. By this I mean not just the press but also public service broadcasting so far as it competes for audiences with commercial broadcasting and on its dominant terms. Public communication is transformed into the politics of consumerism. Politicians appeal to potential voters not as rational beings concerned for the public good, but in the mode of advertising, as creatures of passing and largely irrational appetite, whose self-interest they must purchase. Such a politics is forced to take on the terms of address of the media it uses and to address its readers, viewers and listeners within the set of social relations that those media have created for other purposes. Thus the citizen is addressed as a private individual rather than as a member of a public, within a privatized domestic sphere rather than within public life. Think, for instance, of the profound political difference between reading a newspaper in one's place of work or in a café and discussing it with those who share that set of social relations on the one hand, and watching TV within the family circle or listening to radio or watching a videocassette on an individual domestic basis on the other. Think of the Sony Walkman as a concrete embodiment of social isolation, as opposed to participation at a rock concert.

VI

However, while I want to argue that the public service model of the media has at its heart a set of properly political values, and that its operation both requires and fosters a set of social relations, distinct from and opposed to economic values and relations essential to an operating democracy, at the same time in its actual historical operation it has so far shared with the Habermasian concept of the public sphere

a crucial failure to recognize the problem of mediation within the public sphere and thus the role of knowledge-brokers within the system. In particular the public service model has failed to come to terms with the proper and necessary function of both journalists and politicians. In relation to both groups there is a failure sufficiently to distinguish between two communicative functions within the public sphere: the collection and dissemination of *information*, and the provision of a forum for *debate*.

Journalists within public service broadcasting, under the banner of balance and objectivity, claim to carry out both functions and to do so in the name of the public. However, this produces a contradiction. Obviously, the function of information search and exposition as carried out at its best, by teachers, cannot simply be equated with political advocacy. Here Jay Blumler is right (Blumler *et al.* 1978). But journalists are not in any way accountable to the public they claim to serve and themselves constitute a distinct interest. How then are we to ensure that this expository function is carried out responsibly? It needs to be accompanied by legislation for freedom of information and so forth. It also needs much better-trained journalists. Finally, its sheer expensiveness depends upon public provision, since otherwise high-quality information will become not a public good but an expensive private asset. All this complex institution needs a public accountability structure of its own, together with a code of professional values distinct from the political debate. Within such a structure, much greater direct access must be given to independent fields of social expertise. It is a perennial and justified criticism of journalists by experts that journalists themselves decide the agenda of what is relevant, and at the same time too often garble the information for presentational purposes. Perhaps bodies such as the Economic and Social Research Council, Greenpeace, Social Audit (one could list many others) should have regular access to broadcasting and print channels and employ their own journalists to clarify current issues for the general public as a background to more informed political debate.

At the same time, the conduct of debate in the mass media needs to be *more* highly politicized with political parties and other major organized social movements having access to the screen on their own terms. One might indeed envisage a situation where any group that could obtain a membership of over a certain size would be eligible for regular access to airtime and national newspaper space. Habermas himself seems to envisage some such arrangement when he argues that the public sphere today requires 'a public body of organized private individuals'. Such organizations would themselves, he argues, have to have democratic internal structures. The public sphere, he writes, 'could only be realized today on an altered basis as a rational reorganization of social and political power under the mutual control of rival organizations committed to the public sphere in their internal structure as well as in their relations with the State and each other' (Habermas 1979: 201).

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