

## The media and the public sphere

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The great strength of the public service model, to which we need to hang on through all the twists and turns of the argument that has raged around it, is the way it (a) presupposes and then tries to develop in its practice a set of social relations which are distinctly political rather than economic, and (b) at the same time attempts to insulate itself from control by the state as opposed to, and this is often forgotten, political control. Reith's original version 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 was hopelessly linked to a narrow class-based definition of the public good and that it 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 only be imposed on listeners 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.

### **The economic and the political**

For the problem with liberal free press theory is not just that the market has produced conditions of oligopoly which undercut the liberal ideal nor that private ownership leads to direct manipulation of political communication, although it does, but that there is a 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, and so on, 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 co-ordinated by the invisible hand of the market. This contradiction produces two clashing concepts of human freedom. On the one hand, as expressed for instance by Hayek and in some versions of Thatcherism and Reaganism, human freedom is defined in economic terms as the freedom to pursue private interest without political constraint. On the other hand, the socialist and Marxist traditions define freedom in political terms and advocate political intervention in the workings of the market in order to liberate the majority from its constraints. Both traditions assume that the contradiction is resolvable by suppressing either the political or the economic. These clashing concepts of freedom are reflected in debates about the media's political role. On one side the market is seen as a bulwark against the great enemy, state censorship. Thus private ownership of the means of communication is at best a positive good and at worst the lesser of two necessary evils. On the other side capitalist control of the media is seen as an obstacle to free political communication and as the explanation of the media's role in maintaining capitalist class hegemony. In both traditions politics is equated with state power.

I want to argue that this contradiction is irresolvable because in social formations characterized by an advanced division of labour, both functionally and spatially, only the market is capable of handling the necessary scale of allocative decision-making across wide sectors of human productive activity, while at the same time there is a range of social decisions which no democratic society will be prepared to leave to the market, or rather if it does leave them to the market, it forfeits all claims to democracy. These include the control of social violence, the provision of a basic level of health and material well-being and above all includes control over the development of the market itself, both in its internal structure, for example, the problem of monopoly, and its externalities, such as environmental questions.

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 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 examining this contradiction because they operate simultaneously across the two realms. Thus 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 view, however often it may actually take place, 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 and yet access to the mass media, as both channels of information and fora 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. Thus political communication which is forced to channel itself via commercial media – and here I refer not just to the press but to public service broadcasting so far as it competes for audiences with commercial broadcasting and on its dominant terms – becomes the politics of consumerism. Politicians relate 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, to whose self-interest they must appeal. Politics, as Reagan so strikingly demonstrates, becomes not a matter of confronting real issues and choices, but of image. Appeal to people's dreams and fantasies and reality will take care of itself. Politics becomes no longer a matter of balancing priorities or choosing between desirable but incompatible ends within a political programme, but of single issues which can be packaged in easily consumable and sellable form, like soap powder, and to which the response, like that of the decision to purchase, is a simple and immediate yes or no, not the 'just a moment' of debate. The contemporary prevalence of this model of politics among voters is well illustrated by H. Himmelweit *et al.*'s recent book *How Voters Decide* where what the authors identify as the consumer model of voting appears to best explain actual voting behaviour. Following this model, as the authors put it, 'what matters is that the act of voting, like the purchase of goods, is seen as simply one instance of decision making, no different in kind from the process whereby other decisions are reached' (Himmelweit *et al.*, 1985). Unfortunately, however, there is no mechanism in the political realm like that of the invisible hand of the market, to ensure that individual responses to distinctly presented political issues result in coherent political action. It is a form of politics and political communication which enables both citizens and politicians to live in an essentially apolitical world where all our desires can be satisfied, where we can have higher welfare benefits, higher defence expenditure and lower taxes, where we can strengthen the rights of women without challenging the rights of men, where we can appeal to the majority but at the same time protect minorities. 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 appealed to as a private individual rather than as a member of a public, within a privatized domestic sphere rather than within that of public life. For instance, think of the profound political difference between reading a newspaper in one's place of work or in a cafe and discussing it with those who share that concrete set of social relations on the one hand, and watching TV within the family circle or listening to radio or watching

a video-cassette 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.

### Public service and knowledge-broking

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 the economic values and relations which are 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 social 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, on the one hand the collection and dissemination of information and on the other 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. On the one hand, the function of information search and exposition, that carried out at its best, for instance, by teachers, cannot simply be equated with political advocacy. Here Jay Blumler is right (Blumler *et al.*, 1978). On the other hand, 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 function is carried out responsibly? It clearly needs to be accompanied by a structure of Freedom of Information, and so on. It also needs much better trained journalists. It also, because of its expense, quite clearly depends upon a public service structure of provision, since otherwise high quality information will become not a public good but an expensive private asset. But it still remains that the function cannot simply be left to unaccountable journalists. It needs a public accountability structure of its own and a quite distinct code of professional values separate from the political debate function. Within such a structure much greater direct access needs to be given to independent fields of social expertise. It is a perennial and justifiable 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 Medical Research Council, the Economic and Social Research Council, Greenpeace, Social Audit, and 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.

On the other hand, the debate function needs to be more highly politicized, with political parties and other major organized social movements having access to the screen on their own terms rather as was the case until recently in Holland, although that model is itself in the process of being

undermined by the very economic forces to which I pointed at the outset. Here one might envisage a situation where any group that could obtain a membership of over a certain size would be eligible for regular access to air time and national newspaper space. Indeed Habermas himself seems to envisage some such arrangement when he argues that the Public Sphere today requires that 'a public body of organized private individuals take the place of the now defunct public body of 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, p. 201).

### Public service and the political party

To date, the operation of public service broadcasting has tended to reinforce the apoliticism of consumerism by pitting broadcasting, not just against the state, but against politicians. It is politicians that are seen as inherently untrustworthy, as having to be criticized, as trying to interfere in and control broadcasting. Furthermore, as it has operated within the confines of a tradition of critical journalism and of balance and objectivity, broadcasting has contributed to the observable decline of the political party. It has done so by pre-empting its role as a communicator of politically relevant information and as a structurer of political debate. As the press has become steadily more depoliticized, politicians and political parties have been forced to communicate to the electorate via TV on terms largely dictated by journalists. The parties are unable to expound a coherent position, but are forced to respond issue by issue. By concentrating on personalities TV has at the same time enhanced the position of political leaders at the expense of party organizations. This decline of the political party matters because, in societies split by conflicts of interest (in my view all conceivable societies), parties represent the rationalist and universalist moment of the Hegelian state. That is to say, they are the indispensable institutional form by which the views of the individuals are shaped into that necessary hierarchy of interlocking, mutually interdependent ends and means that we call a political programme, without which rational political action in terms of some version of the public good is impossible. That is not to say that the present pattern of parties is optimal. But the current fashion for movement politics, CND, the women's movement, and so on, which is in itself in part a response to the decline of political parties induced by existing patterns of media dominance, in part a product of that very consumerist ideology I am concerned to critique, in part an expression of dissatisfaction with the programmes of existing parties, in no way provides an alternative to the political party, as indeed these movements are discovering. You cannot develop a realistic and realizable movement towards disarmament or women's rights unless it is integrated with other social and economic objectives into some structure and universal programme of political priorities.

A similar argument holds against the other alternative posed to the public

service model, that of some version of pluralism, however the material base of that pluralism might be decided. But in general such visions, such yearnings for a return to a golden age of press freedom, are attempts precisely to avoid the crunch of political choice. Indeed, that is perhaps the main unconscious attraction of the free press model and indeed of the market model, that it removes the weight of conscious social choice.

### Public service, universalism and an international public sphere

One of the strengths of the public sphere concept which I would want to stress and which I would want to link to any revitalized notion of public service is that of universalism. I mean by this the notion that the scope of a political decision structure must be coterminous with the scope of the powers it aims to control. In recent tradition this has in general meant within the boundaries of the nation-state, so that citizenship of such states is defined in terms of certain nationally universal rights and obligations. The principle of tying voting to property rights was an important expression of this because it recognized the importance of the relationship between the right to participate in decision making and a not easily avoidable involvement in the consequences of those decisions. It is precisely for this reason that capital, so long as it can flow internationally with ease, should not be accorded such rights. Within this envelope of rights and obligations all citizens, whether they are on the winning or losing side of a political debate, are forced to live with its consequences. Thus proper democratic participation cannot be irresponsible by definition. In some countries this important truth is embodied in laws requiring all citizens to vote. Now, while it would clearly be both impossible and undesirable to require all citizens to participate in a minimum amount of political information consumption and debate or to make electoral participation dependent upon such participation, in principle it is a mere corollary of a requirement to vote. Indeed this is the principle which trade unions correctly mobilize against the institution of mandatory postal ballots. However, public policy should, if democracy is to be taken seriously, favour citizen participation in such debate. If that is the case debate must include as many of the existing views in a society on the relevant issues as possible. This cannot, by definition, be provided by sectionalized, ghettoized media talking only to a particular interest group or the party faithful. In terms of national issues it must take place at a national level and is undercut by a multiplication of simultaneous viewing and listening options. It is this that is the rational core of the argument mobilized in favour of the existing public service broadcasting duopoly in Britain: namely, that the existence of a national focus for political debate and information is important to the national political process. The problem of the relations of scale needed between communication channels and political power then takes on a different dimension when we consider the transnational aspect of current media developments.

If we see media structures as central to the democratic polity and if the universalism of the one must match that of the latter, clearly the current process by which national media control is being undercut is part of that

process by which power is being transferred in the economy to the international level without the parallel development of adequate political or communication structures. This is already apparent from the problem facing European governments, in the face of satellite broadcasting, of trying to match their different systems of advertising control and indeed, although so far as I know this has not yet been discussed, systems of political access.

Let us be clear. It is in the interest of the controllers of multinational capital to keep nation-states and their citizens in a state of disunity and dysfunctional ignorance unified only by market structures within which such capital can freely flow, while at the same time they develop their own private communication networks. The development of the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* and of private, high-cost, proprietary data networks and services on an international scale to serve the corporate community and its agents is a clear sign of this trend. Thus not only do we face the challenge of sustaining and developing the public sphere at a national level. Such a development will simply be bypassed, if we do not, at the same time and perhaps with greater urgency, begin to develop a public sphere where at present one hardly exists, namely, at the international level. It is here that current threats, led by the US government, but supported and abetted by the UK, to UNESCO and the ITU, need to be seen for what they are, attempts to destroy what little public sphere actually exists at an international level. It is significant that the crime of which these institutions stand accused is 'politicization'.

In conclusion, I have tried to argue here that the necessary defence and expansion of the public sphere as an integral part of a democratic society requires us to re-evaluate the public service model of public communication and, while being necessarily critical of its concrete historical actualization, defend it and build upon the potential of its rational core in the face of the existing and growing threats to its continued existence.

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