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Media organisations in society

Central issues

GOLDSMITHS MEDIA GROUP[1]

The twentieth century has seen a transformation in the nature of communication. Much of it is now mediated through print or electronic technology; bought and sold in a market system; and produced in institutions marked by a complex division of labour. The conservative response has been divided between those who mourn the rise of mass culture, and those who see the hidden hand of the market as benignly ensuring that people get what they want in terms of information and entertainment. For both camps, media organisations are of little interest. They are either, in the first case, the transmitters of a trivial, fragmented culture; or, in the second, neutral respondents to public opinion, who need merely to be protected from state intervention in order to work effectively.

Media and communication studies, generally undertaken by those of the centre and of the left, have by contrast seen media organisations as crucial to an understanding of the consequences of the rise of mass communication. But a schism has marked the field for half a century, between liberals who find in modern mass media a multiplication of representative voices, forming a collective conversation, and radicals who see a worrying concentration of power. In this first section, we want to outline the basis of the radical approach to the political economy of communications, which informs many of the essays in this book; and in the second and third sections we proceed to outline some of the ways in which the radical approach has evolved in the light of new developments and debates.

The cultural industries

The cornerstone of the radical case is to see the mass media as capitalist enterprises. The most developed version of this argument is what has been called the 'cultural industries' approach, which has its root in the Frankfurt School's critique of the 'Culture Industry' (Adorno and Horkheimer 1978

[1941]), but has been developed in recent years by critical media economists such as Bernard Miège (1989) and Nicholas Garnham (1990). This school of writing takes its name from the adherence of its writers to the view that, in the modern world, the production of culture has been largely industrialised; but that the particular features of this industrialisation are distinct from those of other sectors.

At the heart of capitalism is the requirement to generate profit. Yet, according to Nicholas Garnham, there is a contradiction in entertainment capitalism which complicates considerably the way that capitalists seek to make a profit in the field of culture. A tension exists between a general drive towards audience maximisation on the part of cultural firms and a countervailing drive by the same firms to limit access in order to achieve scarcity (thereby keeping unit prices high). Both of these contradictory features derive from the way that consumers use the cultural commodity.

One of these use-values of the cultural commodity is novelty. Consumers require cultural products to be distinguishable from each other. Garnham notes that this makes every film, record or book more like a prototype than a copy. The drive for novelty, achieved through intensive development activity, means that, in the cultural industries, production costs are high relative to the costs of reproduction. The music on a compact disc costs far more to produce in a studio and to publicise in advance of its release than does its subsequent mechanical reproduction in a factory. Marginal returns grow significantly with each unit sold, and this puts an emphasis on audience maximisation as a source of profit. In order to meet this challenge of audience maximisation, media transnationals have become particularly expert in deploying strategies of concentration, internationalisation and cross-sector ownership (though these are of course features of other industries too).

Another feature of the cultural commodity, however, is that it is not destroyed in use. A video tape of a film can be lent to dozens, if not hundreds, of people; a chocolate bar can only be consumed once. In order to achieve scarcity, then, cultural firms must, besides working with the state to control piracy, aim to limit access to cultural goods and services by artificial means. Garnham identifies a number of ways in which scarcity is achieved. Primary among them is vertical integration. The ownership of distribution and retail channels allows companies to control release and re-release schedules of videos (think of Disney 'classics' such as *Snow White*), films, records, new magazines, etc., thereby ensuring the adequate availability (or strategic unavailability) of goods.

A third feature of cultural commodities is that audiences tend to use them in their efforts to achieve difference and distinction from other users (see Bourdieu 1984). Because the criteria for judging difference and distinction fluctuate with fashion, the demand for any given cultural commodity is unpredictable. As a consequence, risk needs to be spread across as diverse a repertoire of cultural products as possible. This creates an especially strong

drive towards concentration and oligopoly, as those companies which cannot afford to spread their risks via a wide range of products tend either to be absorbed into larger corporations, or to disappear altogether.

Garnham's model, then, helps to explain some striking features about contemporary media organisations. Internationalisation has been a feature of the cultural industries for many decades (think of Hollywood's domination of the international film market from the 1920s on) but has intensified in recent years. The importance of cross-media ownership can be seen in the daily manoeuvres of various British press concerns as they continue to diversify into electronic media, thus circumventing ownership restrictions originally constructed to ensure a plurality of voices in society (Williams 1996). Evidence of the viability of vertical integration is provided by the fact that 'the five largest media firms in the world in terms of sales – Time Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom and News Corporation – are also the most fully integrated global giants' (Herman and McChesney 1997: 70). And though neither concentration nor oligopoly is new to the realm of international entertainment capitalism, recent giant purchases – of ABC/Capital Cities by Disney, of Ted Turner's CNN by Time Warner, of CBS by Westinghouse – are only the most prominent of the myriad alliances, partnerships, mergers, acquisitions and anti-competitive manoeuvres that the climate of 'deregulation' in the 1980s and 1990s has especially encouraged (Herman and McChesney 1997: 41–69).

So features of the cultural industries, rooted in the way that audiences use cultural commodities, make profit-making complex and difficult; but the extraordinary successes of transnational media and entertainment corporations attest to the possibility of doing so. These strategies are worrying to radical critics because they mean that the means of communication will tend to be owned by the powerful and wealthy, for the simple reason that all the strategies referred to require huge resources. The implication of this political economy approach is that there is an inbuilt tendency in capitalism for those who already have power to be reinforced.

The features of the cultural commodity analysed by Garnham should not, however, be seen as iron laws which determine all that takes place in the cultural market. This is merely a starting-point for understanding the dynamics underlying industrial strategies in the sector. Media sociology can serve as the sister-discipline to such a political economy, by examining how regulation policy, political action, aesthetic ideologies, professional codes and histories of class, gender and ethnic relationships can all affect the production processes and outcomes within media organisations. In some cases, sociologists have found that what happens in media entertainment organisations is largely determined by the patterns of ownership described above: media workers ultimately, whatever their intentions, engage in actions, and produce content, which reinforces existing patterns of class, gender and ethnic-group power (Gitlin 1994). In other cases, however, analysts have emphasised the production of unusual and innovative work, which cannot

be understood as the product of a coherent 'dominant ideology' (e.g. Frith 1983).

The news media

While radical critiques of the cultural industries have been largely concerned with the production and consumption of cultural commodities, authors investigating the news media have tended to prioritise another set of concerns. The news media play an important part in any political system and are expected to fulfil a number of 'ideal' functions in liberal democratic states (see Keane 1991, McNair 1995 and Negrine 1996, for discussions). These include providing: access for a wide range of citizens to put forward their views; an arena for rational debate on the issues affecting society and the state; a source of objective information, widely available to all citizens; and a check ('watchdog role') on the activities of powerful institutions and individuals. Thus, although news is itself a cultural commodity, produced both privately and publicly, it is also observed and critiqued in terms of its ability to fulfil these 'ideal' functions in democratic societies.

In contrast to liberal and neo-liberal accounts, radicals have sought to demonstrate that news media in capitalist democracies fail to be objective, present rational debate or offer equal access. Radical explanations for this are varied, employing different methods, emphases and perspectives. They have, however, tended to agree on a number of key tenets in their critique. The news media, although a site of social conflict, relay the 'dominant ideology' of the ruling class. Economic concerns ('economic determinism'), to a greater or lesser extent, guide the production of news. Journalists and consumers, while believing that they act autonomously, are in fact socialised and guided by economic conditions and the dominant ideology of the ruling class.

One consistent approach taken by radicals is to look at the ownership and control of organisations that produce news. In Europe broadcasting has, for most of the century, been state owned and/or regulated. This has involved the state appointing directors and determining funding. Where the government of the day has not directly controlled the news media, it still has been responsible for regulating it through legislation on censorship, libel and media ownership. As many radical (Schlesinger et al. 1983, Glasgow University Media Group 1985, Hollingsworth 1986, Schiller 1992) and neo-liberal accounts have demonstrated, states have frequently been prone to abuse their privileged positions in all these matters. State control and ownership, however, have slowly given way to control by large corporations and 'media moguls'. Broadcasting and news media, like the press traditionally, have become predominately private concerns. Once again, many accounts (Evans 1983, Schiller 1989, Tunstall and Palmer 1991, Curran and Seaton 1997) have documented abuse by owners who seek to influence

the work of their employees and the political process to their own corporate ends. Thus, news is powerfully distorted by governments and corporations. Objective reporting and rational debate are understandably threatened when it comes to reporting on issues that involve the interests of these sectors.

Independent journalism is also affected by the fact that news is a business and is widely influenced by economic considerations. First, corporate elites are key shareholders and/or directors of boards for media organisations and businesses are the prime funders of news through the purchase of advertising. They can therefore apply financial pressures when necessary – to censor texts, to gain favourable coverage or simply to appeal to particular audiences (Murdock 1982, Curran 1986, Bagdikian 1992, Gitlin 1994). Second, news production and distribution is expensive and more economically viable when conducted by large corporations that can make maximum use of facilities and networks. The demands of advertisers, coupled with the increased costs of market entry, mean that corporations increasingly influence news production and that alternative and critical news producers decline and gain less access to the process. Thus, the news industry, like other cultural industries, has been subject to a steady process of concentration and conglomeration – one that involves news being produced by fewer interests (Murdock 1982, Chomsky and Herman 1988, Garnham 1990, Curran and Seaton 1997). Third, news is a cultural commodity, but one that is less subject to fashion and ill-equipped to maximise the returns on successful products by simply producing more of them. Instead news producers can only increase profits by making production cuts, recycling news texts (as in 24-hour news) and maximising audiences (or elite audiences) and therefore increasing advertising revenues. As other radical and some liberal commentators have observed, as news has become more privatised and commodified, so its editorial quality has declined and its need to entertain has risen (McNair 1994, Barnett and Curry 1994, Williams 1996). Expensive investigative journalism and foreign news is reduced and business and celebrity news rise (Sigal 1973, Fishman 1980, Tunstall 1996). Thus, economic considerations diminish access, objectivity and rational debate further.

A third general radical approach looks at the cultural and organisational factors which affect journalists involved in the news media. Several studies have attempted to demonstrate that journalists are guided in their news gathering and reporting by the ideas and arguments of corporate and government elites. Content analysis (Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 1980, 1982) of news texts has been used to argue that such elites frequently set news agendas and are reported more favourably than oppositions and non-elites. Sociological studies of news reporting and journalists in action (Hall et al. 1978, Fishman 1980, Ericson et al. 1989, Hallin 1994) have supported this contention. They have demonstrated that government and institutional news sources consistently outnumber others and that ordinary

workers and consumers are rarely reported. Journalist routines and their attempts to appear impartial and objective have resulted in a reporting process that enforces the authority ('primary definer' status) of those in power and marginalises others. Once again, access and objectivity have become narrowly constrained in the news media.

Recent developments

Radical critiques of the media were clearly in the ascendancy in the early 1980s. Since then, research emanating from cultural studies and sociology, coupled with postmodern theory, have argued that many of the foundations of the radical critique are highly dubious. Broadcast journalists and liberal sociologists (Annan 1977, Tiffen 1989, Schudson 1991) have countered claims of journalistic bias and argued that pressures imposed from above cannot affect the day-to-day autonomy of working journalists. Audience-reception theorists have argued that audiences interpret texts with a substantial degree of autonomy (Morley 1980, 1992, Ang 1985, Fiske 1987 and Corner 1991). They have forcefully countered the notions that audiences are passive consumers and texts rigidly determined. Coherent elite ideology and economically defined classes were also perceived to be flawed concepts. Several studies (Abercrombie et al. 1984, Hallin 1994, Miller 1994) showed that elites were too fractured and too much in conflict to provide a coherent ideological consensus. Studies of ethnic subcultures (Hebdige 1979, Chambers 1985) and female experiences (Radway 1987, McRobbie 1994), as well as suggesting that there were groups in society that did not submit to any perceived dominant cultural norms, also undermined the credibility of the notion of culture determined by economic conditions alone. Thus, in the academic sphere, dynamic interaction, individual autonomy and/or action, fracture and change have countered the rigid structures and totalising theories that were associated with radical critiques.

During this same period of academic change, the political landscape and the shape of the media industries have simultaneously been transformed. Free-market arguments have become dominant with the collapse of Eastern European communism and the succession of neo-liberal governments worldwide. Globalisation, privatisation and deregulation of the media (including news media) industries has proceeded rapidly. Conservative politicians and media owners (Veljanovski 1989, 1990, Sola Pool 1990), arguing for consumer choice and free private industry rather than elite preference and state inefficiency and corruption, appear to have won through and continue to guide current legislative policy (see Williams 1996, Franklin 1997, Curran and Seaton 1997). Thus, in theory, radical perspectives appear to have lost tremendous ground. In practice, their concerns have been ignored by prevailing political opinion.

However, although radical critiques have proved to be conceptually

vulnerable, continuing trends in media production indicate that their concerns are more justified than ever. Deregulation, concentration and conglomeration proceed, despite the arrival of left-leaning governments. Abuses by governments, powerful media owners, advertisers and corporate bodies have not diminished. Cuts in editorial budgets and the casualisation of the journalist workforce is further reducing reporter autonomy. 'Serious' news is being further commodified and coming to resemble 'infotainment' or 'newszak'. Institutional sources still dominate news texts and many sections of the public are being further excluded from news agendas. All these trends continue to be documented in the UK (Murdock 1990, Tunstall 1996, Williams 1996, Curran and Seaton 1997, Franklin 1997) and the US (Schiller 1989, Bagdikian 1992, Mancini and Swanson 1996, Herman and McChesney 1997, McChesney 1997). Even liberal theorists and journalists (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Fallows 1996) are showing extreme concern about the profession of journalism and the 'crisis of public communication'. Thus the radical critique of news media lacking objectivity, information, rational debate and wide access is no less valid than it was two decades ago. Much of traditional radical theory, in contrast, is in need of a major overhaul.

DISPERSAL OF MEDIA POWER: AUTONOMY AND RESISTANCE WITHIN PRODUCTION

The opening section of this chapter outlined the more established radical approaches to the study of entertainment and news-media production. It argued that, despite the range of significant critiques of radical political economy that emerged during the 1980s and 1990s, the relevance of the approach was as important as ever. In spite of its shortcomings, radical political economy needed to be refined and reformulated rather than rejected. One way in which this tradition sought to renew itself was through a Gramscian reappraisal that emphasised conflict (Curran 1996d). This led to the media being conceived of as a battlefield between contending groups rather than as a top-down instrument of control. However, Gramscianism was a rather unstable basis of reformulation since it tended to mean different things to different analysts. This rethinking also raised a number of questions. In what way is a radical approach emphasising social conflict different from a liberal pluralist one stressing rivalry and disagreement? More generally, how is a 'loosened-up' version of radical political economy different from liberal argument?

This is explored further here in relation to three areas: changing patterns of ownership and organisation; news sources and media–source relations; and the impact of new technologies. In each of these research areas, radical

and liberal perspectives have been applied but with different emphases and different terminology. In each case a strong liberal-pluralist line has emerged to challenge many of the central tenets of radical political economy. 'Individual autonomy' and 'dynamic processes of contestation' have replaced 'dominant ideology' and 'structures'; cultural and technological factors have been highlighted over 'economic determinism' and 'class'; and 'the micro-physics of power' and bottom-up influences have challenged 'macro explanations' of 'top-down power'. Throughout, a strong liberal line has emerged – one that emphasises the autonomy of the individual and the dispersal of power within media production. Whether it be independent production companies, or environmentalists using the Internet, or opposition sources setting news agendas, there is a sense that traditional top-down power structures have been weakened or broken. Just as audiences can actively consume media products, so individual media workers and opposition organisations can affect the media production process – regardless of the increasing trends towards concentrated ownership and globalisation of media corporations.

The aims of this section are therefore to present and critically explore some of these alternative areas of debate. It concludes that many of these studies and perspectives offer some useful challenges and provide further grounds for research for those interested in production issues. However, it also finds problems in a number of liberal positions that have over-emphasised small gains and ignored great losses of individual autonomy and the continued exclusion of opposition groups. The exercise of political power may be more mediated and complex than many radical political economists have acknowledged; but its effects are just as keenly felt, no matter the level of production or individual opposition.

One strong area of liberal challenge to radical political economy is in relation to questions of control and individual autonomy within media organisations. The radical approach to the political economy of the media traditionally assumes that the media industries reinforce social power because the wealthy and powerful own them. Ownership entails a large degree of control over operations, the recruitment and reward of cultural labour and, ultimately, media content. Consequently, larger media conglomerates and more powerful media owners result in greater control of the media. However, if the power of ownership is more limited, and the levels of individual autonomy greater than radicals have assumed, then the arguments about ownership become rather less relevant. The findings of much recent work on media production have indeed emphasised such devolved patterns of control.

Work on the 'managerial revolution' (Burnham 1962, Berle and Means 1968) has provided one key component for a thesis emphasising independence and autonomy for those working within many types of industry. This stressed that, as the twentieth century has progressed, control of companies has passed from single owners to complex networks of shareholders and

'managerial elites'. As companies become larger, shareholders become more dispersed and anonymous. Companies consequently become more controlled by highly skilled professional elites with outlooks and rewards that are different from those of traditional capitalist owners. A second wave of research on post-Fordism and 'flexible specialisation' (e.g. Aglietta 1979, Piore and Sabel 1984) has more recently emerged to complement this thesis. These studies have identified a transition in industry away from Fordist structures of production that involved large-scale centralised production, rigid bureaucratic managerial hierarchies and the use of mass, unskilled, cheap labour. Instead, post-Fordist production methods have, among other things, introduced decentralised networks of companies and highly skilled, flexible and professional workforces. Expanding multinational companies may be bigger and richer but are not necessarily controlled more rigidly from the centre. Instead, new consensual networks are made up of large corporations and small, specialist companies that service them, often in regional agglomerations which serve to bolster local economies. Indeed, for writers such as Castells (1996), the logic of the network is more significant than power in any particular part of that network.

These positions have clearly provided the focus for a number of recent studies on 'independent producers' operating within the media industries. Independent producers (that is, small companies with no direct ties to major corporations) have frequently been a feature of media production. They have been credited with a number of innovations in popular music (Gillett 1971, Chapple and Garofalo 1977) and were crucial to changes in the film industry from the 1950s onwards (Christopherson and Storper 1986). More recently, the importance of independent producers and post-Fordist production methods has been recognised particularly in the film (Wasko 1994, Maltby 1995, ch. 2), television (Veljanovski 1989) and magazine (Driver and Gillespie 1993) sectors. The most notable instance in the UK has been the rise of an independent broadcasting sector, based around organisational changes in British broadcasting. This began with the introduction of Channel 4 (1982). Rather than making its own programmes, the channel functioned right from the start as a 'publisher-contractor'. This trend has continued with further legislation (1990) which required the BBC and ITV networks to contract out at least 25 per cent of their programming to independent producers. Such changes, across each of these industries, have been credited with: media rejuvenation; the vertical 'disintegration' of dominant centralised cultural production companies; a dispersal of power; and better conditions in which individual creativity and diversity can flourish. As such, post-Fordism and independent production networks were praised by neo-liberals (Veljanovski 1989), liberals (Keane 1991) and the Left (Hall and Jacques 1989), each side expressing optimism over a perceived dispersal of media power and greater individual autonomy.

Clearly, changing patterns of media ownership and organisation have important implications for the political economy approach because they

challenge the view that the media reinforce structural inequality within society in line with the agenda of wealthy and powerful owners. On the surface, this would seem to lend support to a more pluralist view, which sees journalists and creative entertainment personnel as acting autonomously of the interests of owners. As workers in the cultural industries become more shielded from the interests of owners – through layers of powerful managerial elites and networks of producing organisations – so independence and diversity should flourish. This position thus supports the established liberal view of news journalists and creative artists. Thus, journalists are alternately driven by 'professional codes', 'news values', 'news routines and practices', and 'fourth estate' values (Gans 1980, Tiffen 1989, Schudson 1991) – all of which reflect a wider pluralist world. Meanwhile, in cultural production, as companies struggle to keep pace with the fickle tastes of audiences, musicians and other creative personnel are given a significant degree of autonomy (Frith 1983, Negus 1992) in carrying out their daily work.

Sources, access and news production

Just as researchers have sought to find increased autonomy within news organisations, they have also reappraised assumptions about the news-production process and access to it. This reappraisal has emerged with a series of studies on news sources, 'promotional culture' (Wernick 1991) and journalist–source relations. These have registered a number of subtle shifts away from traditional radical accounts of news production. First, macro descriptions, centring on media ownership and economic power, have been replaced with micro ones emphasising a media that reflect the wider conflict of source organisations in society. Second, earlier radical work on the means by which dominant elites gained superior source access has been challenged by a series of studies focusing on the increased abilities of opposition and 'resource-poor' groups to gain their own access. In other words, attempts to demonstrate elite control of media output have been superseded by an emphasis on a pluralist account of source competition. In fact, a slide towards pluralism has been an underlying feature of many accounts of sources – be they from liberal or radical scholars.

Up until the late 1980s few studies had made significant observations about the role of sources in news production. The most significant research on the subject came in the radical political economy approach of the Glasgow University Media Group (1976, 1980) and the radical 'structural culturist' approach of Hall et al. (1978; see also Golding and Middleton 1982, Chomsky and Herman 1988). Whereas the Glasgow Group tended to explain elite dominance through many of the macro-economic explanations described above, Hall et al. offered an alternative based on a more detailed analysis from the point of view of media–source relations. This study argued

that journalists, in their search for 'objective' and 'authoritative' accounts, automatically sought out institutionalised sources. These sources, already legitimated by their power, representativeness and expertise, became the 'primary definers' of news agendas. Opposition sources, and journalists themselves, could only respond to those agendas and frameworks already determined. Thus dominant ideology resulted from the media's 'structured preferences' for the opinions of dominant groups.

The emphasis on elite-source power has been reinforced by a number of more recent studies of political (party and institution) and corporate sources and their 'cultural intermediaries'. This has come from a mixture of media studies, journalism and political communications in the UK (Franklin 1994, Negrine 1994, 1996, Jones 1995, Kavanagh 1995, McNair 1995, Scammell 1995, Rosenbaum 1997, Gaber 1998) and North America (Gandy 1992, Maltese 1994, Stauber and Rampton 1995, Ewen 1996, Hall-Jamieson 1996, Kurtz 1998). All these studies have explored the development of elite sources and their increased interest in managing, and ability to manage the media. All have also identified the rapidly expanding group of 'cultural intermediaries' – professionals whose job it is to promote elite source organisations and improve communications with the media. This group, which includes pollsters, marketing experts, agents and public-relations practitioners, has drawn increasing attention from academic disciplines and the general media.

The new wave of news-source research began with a strong critique of the assumptions that underpinned both 'media-centric' political economy and Hall et al.'s thesis. Schlesinger (1990) pointed out the following problems with Hall et al.'s work: primary definers, being often in conflict, did not speak with one voice; neither did they retain the same levels of access over time, let alone possess equal amounts of access. Similarly, journalists and non-official sources were not always relegated to subordinate positions, but did on occasion challenge official accounts. In effect, the structural-culturist approach, like radical functionalism, gave an overly determinist picture that did not account for change and the 'dynamic processes of contestation in a given field of discourse'. Since then, many researchers have tended towards a combination of pluralist or 'radical-pluralist' alternatives.

Pluralist accounts have developed from several sources. One of these has come from liberal empirical studies of journalists and sources. Many of these (Tiffen 1989, Ericson et al. 1989, Schudson 1991) have explained dominant source access as resulting from the organisational routines and values of news gatherers. Journalists do not simply seek out accredited sources, they are attracted to ones that are close at hand, reliable, well informed and liable to be newsworthy. At the same time Nacos (1990) and Hallin (1994) have explained media attacks on the US government as resulting from 'shifts in elite consensus'. When conflicts among primary definers become too strong, the media reflect those battles and contribute to transfers of power between elites.

These two strands have in turn contributed much to a radical-pluralist synthesis that was most strongly advocated in the work of Schlesinger and Tumber (1994), and Miller (1993, 1994). In their work, on the 'criminal-justice arena' and conflict in Northern Ireland, they emphasised the idea of sources acting in continuous competition for dominance of given media discourses. In this competition, primary definers were not structurally predetermined, but achieved that status through accumulations and expenditures of different forms of economic and 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1984). Under these conditions, non-official sources could gain positive media access by proving reliable, authoritative and routine suppliers for journalists. This process resulted in the rise of institutional legitimacy (a form of cultural capital) that enabled non-official organisations to gain access in spite of institutional and economic disadvantages. By the same logic, official and corporate sources were also shown to often lose authority and legitimacy by proving unreliable and/or divided.

These conclusions were taken further in studies focusing on trade unions, local councils and pressure groups (Curran 1990, Kerr and Sachdev 1992, Anderson 1993, Cracknell 1993, Hansen 1993, Franklin 1994, ch. 6, Deacon 1996, and Davis, ch. 7 in this volume). In many of these accounts, the capacity of opposition and 'resource-poor' groups to gain media access by employing their own 'cultural intermediaries' and using alternative media strategies has been emphasised. Thus, in contrast to many radical accounts that stress the 'public-relations state' (Deacon and Golding 1994) and state–corporate 'propaganda model(s)' (Chomsky and Herman 1988), these studies have contributed to a more pluralist account of media–source relations. Indeed, for several authors (Shoemaker 1989, Scammell 1995 and Miller 1998) such approaches appear to be the only means by which opposition and resource-poor groups can circumvent traditional news routines and gain access that was hitherto denied them.

Impact of new technologies

The same themes of autonomy, access and individual choice have crept into discussions of ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) and media production. The recent developments of microprocessor, telecommunications and digital technologies have transformed the processes of media production and transmission in the 1980s and 1990s. Thus, older debates, about 'technological determinism' and the part played by technology in either emancipating or repressing the mass of society, have resurfaced. Once again, the main thrust of liberal pluralists and policy-makers alike has been to emphasise a 'techno-utopian' vision of improved prosperity, education, access and, ultimately, greater individual autonomy. In this scenario, technology becomes a determining factor that can overcome the social and economic inequalities that underpin radical political economy descriptions.

Radical approaches towards the impact of new technologies have traditionally been divided. On the one hand, they have been consistently aware of the impacts of new technology on jobs and management–employee relations, and on the increased ability of governments and corporations to strengthen their control over the mass media. On the other, they have been hard pressed to avoid opponents' claims, mostly levelled at the Frankfurt School, that they are simply 'cultural pessimists', advocates of a 'hypodermic-syringe' model of media production, or simply 'Luddite' (see Webster and Robins 1986). An additional problem has been that many radicals have tended to overlook discussions of technology and technological determinism, preferring instead to concentrate on explanations which more traditionally rely on social, political and economic determinants in the production process. However, there has also been a strong positive advocacy of technology – one that passes through Brecht (1930), Benjamin (1969) and Enzensberger (1976) – which sees it as a source of enlightenment and progressive change.

The concerns of liberal and conservative technological determinists have consistently been to promote ICTs as the means of achieving general human prosperity. McLuhan (1964), Bell (1976), Toffler (1980) and Sola Pool (1983) are among those who have written extensively about the great benefits of the new 'information society' and electronic 'global village'. Such technological optimism has clearly informed more recent discussions concerning autonomy within production and individual access. The transformation from Fordist to post-Fordist organisational structures is very much related to new technologies. For Piore and Sabel (1984) and Murray (1989), it is new ICTs which raise skill levels, enable flexible specialisation, and bring into being weak power structures and producer networks. Jobs are less rigid and manual, flexibility and employee autonomy higher. Thus individual workers are both more autonomous and gain greater job satisfaction.

Opportunities for access have also appeared to increase. As ICTs become more mass-produced and cheaper, so the possibilities for individuals to access public forms of communication and political agendas have grown (see Downing 1984, and collection in Dowmunt (ed.) 1993). The expansion of first cable and then digital television, along with cheap production technology, means greater opportunities for low-budget and alternative broadcasting. The clearest examples of this have been in the rise of community-access cable television in North America (Halleck 1984, Goldberg 1990) and the BBC's Community Programme Unit in the United Kingdom (Dovey 1993, Keighron 1993, Dovey (ed.) 1996). Both put the emphasis on giving individuals and local community groups the means to produce their own broadcasts for public transmission on programmes like *Video Diaries*. Closely related to this is the availability of cheap and lightweight camcorders which, in addition to being used to produce community programmes, are an important tool for activist groups and independent journalists. The cases of Rodney King and Felipe Soltero in the United

States, environmental protesters across Europe, and the plights of people living in East Timor and those involved in Tiananmen Square, have all been highlighted by such video activism. The Internet is another communication means which has been hailed as the new mouthpiece for those lacking public access. The argument put forth is that Internet has enabled dissident voices, from Mexico (Knudsen 1998) to China, as well as independent journalists and activists in North America and Europe, to upset their more powerful oppositions – both by gaining prominent access and through techniques such as net flooding. For authors such as Negroponte (1995), the Internet in effect reconstitutes the Greek agora, subverting orthodox patterns of media concentration and manipulation.

It appears that, in the absence of a consistent and more vocal radical critique, positive technological determinism has been winning the day. A combined wave of positive technological determinism (Negroponte 1995, Turkle 1995, Leeson (ed.) 1996, Pavlik 1996, Poster 1996, Kahin 1997) and technological free-market advocacy (Gingrich 1995, Gates 1996, Dertouzos 1997) has dominated recent discourse. In this overlap of policy-makers, corporate voices and neo-liberal theorists, new technologies have become closely associated with a discourse of prosperity and individual choice. According to this argument, as communication possibilities open up and spectrum scarcity becomes irrelevant, state control becomes unnecessary and no single organisation – private or public – may dominate. Governments, corporations, special interest groups and individuals have thus been placed on a more level playing field in which all may gain access to information and debate and no single entity may gain exclusive control.

Individual autonomy within the production process?

The initial positive accounts of the 'managerial revolution', post-Fordism and independent producers characteristic of the 1980s have, during the 1990s, been replaced by more sober assessment. While resources have been dispersed through networks of organisations and layers of management, has power really been dispersed and have those working in the news and cultural industries been granted greater autonomy? Have the imperatives of the market been any more diluted by the reorganisation of the production process? As the 1990s have progressed, and the full effects of neo-liberal reforms encouraging flexible specialisation and independents have been felt, commentators have become rather more pessimistic in response to these questions. For many, operations may have been dispersed, but power and profits have not. Changes in organisations have been introduced to cut costs and spread risks, not to increase creativity and autonomy. Whoever owns and manages multinational companies, the objectives remain the same. The majority of individual media workers may have found flexibility but they

have also found poorer conditions, greater insecurity and fewer rights. In effect, individual autonomy has in fact declined for many people working in the media industries.

Even before the arguments of the 'managerial revolution' had found their way into liberal and post-Fordist descriptions of media production, the thesis had already been criticised by a number of studies (e.g. Barratt-Brown 1968, Nichols 1969, Hill 1981). These studies questioned whether owner values and objectives were different from managerial ones, and found that top managers, owners and large shareholders often moved in similar circles and were tied together by exclusive networks of interlocking directorships. They also found that personal/family ownership of companies was still widespread and that, even where power lay in the hands of shareholders, it was usually a small number of them.

All these points have also been taken up and applied to the cultural industries also. Several authors, most notably Murdock (1982), Chomsky and Herman (1988) and Tunstall and Palmer (1991) revealed the continuing prevalence of family owners and concentrated ownership. Murdock (1982) additionally analysed the limitations of the 'managerial-revolution' thesis as applied to media industries. He drew on a recognised crucial distinction between two forms of control which owners and managers could exert: allocative and operational. Allocative control consists of decisions connected to overall policy-formulation; decisions which included making senior appointments, allocating resources, dictation of editorial lines and product investment lines, and control over the distribution of profits. Operational control, in effect, consists of making effective use of allocated resources and pursuing policy decisions that have already been dictated. Murdock argued that managerial elites, in most cases, had operational rather than allocative control. In other words, they still followed the central aims and objectives laid down by owners. He and other authors (e.g. Evans 1983, Hollingsworth 1986, Curran and Seaton 1997) have since offered a steady supply of examples of owner interference that affected operational control to a high degree.

Equally strong objections have been raised in relation to the rise of post-Fordist networks and independent producers. Gomery (1986) has revisited the Hollywood studio system, Gitlin (1994) the US television networks, Hesmondhalgh (1996, 1998) the record industry, and Robins and Cornford (1992) the British television industry. Each has also noted several negative trends that have resulted from the rise of independents. First, power has very much remained in the hands of the majors in that they maintain control of the money supply and distribution channels. In each case there are a handful of majors/commissioning companies and up to several hundred potential suppliers. This means that the majors, more than ever, are in a position to dictate the conditions of supply. Suppliers, in contrast, operate with little reserve capital and short-term contracts. Many therefore go out of business or, if they become successful, risk take-over by the majors. In

each observed case, the evolution of independents and vertical disintegration has been followed by a strong tendency towards 'virtual integration' or 'reintegration'. In contracting out work, the majors also absolve themselves of the overheads, training needs and employment rights associated with direct employment of their workforces. Unionisation among fragmented and dispersed workforces is increasingly difficult to sustain. In effect, the majors have not only increased the flexibility and diversity of the production process, they have cut their costs, reduced employee power and spread their risks.

The losers in these cost-cutting, de-unionisation and risk-redistribution trends are those working in the cultural industries. At the top end there is an extremely well-paid group of film stars, top bands, successful producers, presenters, news readers and so on. But for the vast majority of those employed in the cultural industries, even more than in other industries, flexible specialisation has meant little job security, depressed wages, few employment rights and long hours. Hutton (1996), in a recent critique of the impact of neo-liberal market reforms on British society, identified a developing 30:30:40 division in the labour market. Thirty per cent were unemployed and 30 per cent were in 'insecure employment', being employed on a casual, part-time or self-employed basis. Only 40 per cent were in full-time permanent employment. A brief look at the news industry in Britain demonstrates that the majority of journalists now fit into one of the first two categories. Several national newspapers, and the BBC, have cut the numbers of editorial staff by between a third and a half since the late 1980s. According to Franklin (1997, ch. 3) some 80 per cent of journalists in the UK are now either freelancers, part-timers or employed on contracts of 12 months or less. Under such conditions one can only conclude that journalists and other media workers have very little independence or security and are even less likely to oppose management decisions and editorial lines. Thus the long-term effect of organisational changes has most likely been a decline in the autonomy of media employees.

Sources and the question of access?

While research into source activity has moved the debate into a more pluralist arena, the same research has simultaneously undermined traditional liberal accounts of news production. The first point to make is that all studies of sources, by their very nature, have the effect of making the traditional liberal description of independent 'journalists at work' rather untenable. If news comes out of source supply and media–source relations then it isn't simply the product of an independent 'fourth-estate' media. Under such conditions, liberal-pluralist paradigms must therefore rely on two things: 1) that journalists remain in control of their material and have the upper hand over sources, and 2) that source access remains relatively evenly distributed

among different source sectors. However, as much recent work demonstrates, neither of these assumptions can be sustained.

On the first point, both liberals and radicals appear to be moving towards the general opinion that journalists are losing control. Up until the late 1980s the consensus had been that the attempts of either side to manage the other resulted in a see-saw 'tug-of-war', in which sources were slightly stronger but neither side dominated for long (Sigal 1973, Fishman 1980, Gans 1980, Ericson et al. 1989, Tiffen 1989). Ultimately, factors such as source competition, media competition, changing conditions of production and the benefits of media–source co-operation resulted in a closely contested level of equilibrium. However, it has since become apparent that dramatic changes are taking place among both source and media organisations. Such changes, it is suggested, have resulted in a strengthening of the position of source power at a time when journalistic power is seriously under threat. As all the accounts of sources and cultural intermediaries argue, organisations are deliberately targeting the media and investing large sums and hiring personnel to do just that. At the same time journalists are having to produce more with fewer staff and smaller editorial budgets. In Tunstall's (1996) estimation, journalists are now having to produce two or three times the amount of copy they did in the 1960s. These transitions among sources and media outlets have resulted in a significant transfer of political, economic and news-gathering resources – away from journalists and towards sources. Journalists have drifted away from the activities of costly investigative journalism towards reactive news production that relies more on routine source supply. According to the work of Sigal (1973), Fishman (1980) and Gandy (1980), in the United States journalists have for some decades been ever more dependent on the 'information subsidies' supplied to them by sources. These conclusions have been echoed more recently by British scholars (Tunstall 1996, Franklin 1997). As many recent accounts of 'spin doctors' also conclude (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, Gaber 1998, Rosenbaum 1997), journalists are all too often losing the tug-of-war.

On the second point, it is equally clear that source access is far from equal. In fact, one thing that virtually all studies of news production agree upon, be they liberal (Tunstall 1971, Sigal 1973, Gans 1979, Tiffen 1989 and Blumler and Gurevitch 1995) or radical (Glasgow University Media Group 1976, 1980, Hall et al. 1978, Gitlin 1980, Gandy 1980, Chomsky and Herman 1988, Hallin 1994) is that news has been consistently dominated by sources from government and established institutions. Although non-institutional and 'resource-poor' organisations are becoming increasingly adept at influencing news agendas, there remain several factors which, in theory, will continue to bias access against them.

From a radical political economy perspective, corporate and state sources have massive institutional and economic resource advantages that cannot be matched. The first of these is the power to restrict or enable access to

information. The state, and many of its institutions, will always have the political, legal and financial means with which to apply pressure on journalists. Second, institutional and some corporate sources, in spite of elite conflicts and breakdowns, have a de facto legitimacy conferred on them – something that has to be gained by other sources. News values dictate that the public must be informed of the policies and activities of individuals and institutions which, in theory, draw their legitimacy from the support of the public. Linked to institutional resource advantages are economic resource advantages. For Fishman (1980), Chomsky and Herman (1988), and Gandy (1992), source access is linked to financial and human resources and these are clearly unequally distributed. More resources mean more contacts in the media, an increased capacity to produce information subsidies, multiple modes of communication, and continuous media operations. These extreme differences in economic resources mean well-resourced organisations can inundate the media and set the agenda while the attempts of resource-poor organisations become quickly marginalised. This point was made abundantly clear by Miller (1994) in his comparison of Sinn Fein and government communications capabilities in Northern Ireland, by Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model in the United States, and by Jones in his comparison of the National Union of Miners and the National Coal Board during the 1984/5 miners' strike. Thus, institutions are, and are likely to remain, the most common sources for journalists. The opportunities for access may have widened but, equally, elite sources are more able to dominate media content than ever before.

New technologies: from optimism to pessimism

Radical responses to the recent waves of technological optimism have come from a number of directions. For most, the gains have not been offset by the losses. If ICTs have enabled media workers to gain more independence, and individuals to gain more channels of access, they have also enabled those in positions of power to extend that power. Ultimately, if technology has the power to determine social transformations, that power is also directed within existing socio-economic systems. Thus, technology changes the conditions of production, and with it all individuals in potentially positive ways; but it also does so in a way that reflects dominant influences in society.

Many accounts have begun by questioning the liberal assumptions of universal benefit for all arising from the introduction of new technologies. Golding and Murdock (1991), MacKay (1995) and Schiller (1996) have each demonstrated that the ownership and use of new technologies is closely correlated to income. As Miles and Gershuny (1987), Lyon (1995) and Thomas (1995) all argue, ICTs do not determine social relations of power but they do exacerbate them. Thus, social fragmentation and inequality are

only likely to increase with new technologies unless policy-makers introduce appropriate legislation that counters such trends. Returning to camcorders and the Internet, both Keighran (1993) and Dovey (ed.) (1996) point out the limitations of community video projects when they are controlled by mainstream broadcasters. Competition for access is high and subject to control by channel producers; audiences are low. The ability of individuals to use camcorders or the Internet is clearly restricted to those with the appropriate educational, cultural and economic resources.

At the other end of the scale, Schiller (1989), Gitlin (1994) and Herman and McChesney (1997) all argue that new communications technologies allow multinational corporations (MNCs) to expand their operations both vertically and horizontally. They have renewed their conviction (see also Schiller 1996, Bagdikian 1997, Mowlanda 1997), first voiced in the 1970s, that international media processes have to be understood as part of a wider process of global capitalist expansion. The ability to transfer information, data flows and finance means that large MNCs may switch between suppliers and transfer their operation bases to alternatives if their requirements are not met. Control of cutting-edge technology, coupled with the convergence of telecommunication and media technologies, also enables large corporations to keep ahead of their smaller independent rivals – ensuring higher production values, wider channels of distribution, and the exploitation of greater economies of scale. Ultimately, the ability, brought by ICTs, to produce cultural goods cheaply and independently is only one part of the equation.

At the site of production, new technologies have similarly been introduced to 'advance particular managerial strategies' which follow 'fundamental capitalist objectives' (Child 1987; see also Braverman 1984) rather than give employees greater autonomy. Job cuts, labour segmentation, 'multiskilling, and contracting out are often the results of technological innovation being imposed at the behest of accountants rather than employees. Thus many of the job cuts in the news industries, from printers to broadcast crews to editorial staff, have been justified by the introduction of new technologies and have frequently worked to centralise production controls.

In addition, it is also clear that cheap technologies do not simply mean wider individual use; they also mean wider use by political (see Barnett 1997) and corporate elites. On the corporate side, many studies have pointed out that ICTs have been introduced to monitor employees at the same time as decentralising and dividing up production. Marx (1990), Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) and Robins and Webster (1993) have all documented the introduction of new surveillance technologies in the workplace. At the corporate production site, video cameras, telephone recordings and computer programs are being used with increasing regularity to monitor the individual work rates and general behaviour of employees. Katz and Tassone (1990), Gandy (1995) and Lyon (1994) have similarly researched the themes of government [illegible]

computer processing, extensive databases and information transfer systems, along with new CCTV networks, has meant that individual actions are increasingly recorded, collated and stored. Individuals and pressure groups may be able to use ICTs to present their alternative accounts and challenge elites but, at the same time, elites have increased their ability to monitor and control individuals.

Conclusion

Clearly, the liberal-pluralist themes of individual autonomy and the dispersal of media power have been found to be problematic. Debates may have moved into alternative areas but the same radical reservations still apply. Under a discourse that emphasises autonomy, diversity and choice, there has also been an increase in inequality, concentrations of power and a socio-economic restriction of choice. Unfortunately, it is the arguments of the liberals that have been voiced in corporate and government proclamations (Veljanovski 1990, Gingrich 1995, Gates 1996) and carried through by policy-makers in recent legislation. Radical arguments have found few takers outside the academy.

However, it must also be acknowledged that these same areas have also provided a number of important challenges to the older assumptions of radical political economy. They have underlined the importance of accounting for the complexities of media power struggles, the dynamics of change and the activities of individuals involved in microprocesses of media production. They have also provided grounds for radical and liberal synthesis and a broadening of accounts concerned with the exercise of media power.

THE MEDIA AS PUBLIC SPHERE

Alongside debates about how media organisations actually work have run continued debates about how media organisations *should* work. The most consistent focus for such evaluations has been the concept of 'the public sphere' (*öffentlichkeit*) developed by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas as, quite simply, 'the sphere of private people come together as a public' (1989a: 27). More specifically, it is a space where private individuals come together – independently of state institutions or economic activity – to engage in rational-critical debate and decision-making about issues that concern them. An obvious example would be the mechanisms of elections and referenda. Later we will consider how far we need to extend our definition of public-sphere activities.

Leaving aside for the moment questions of definition, the basic question

arises: do existing media organisations (taken together) operate in the way that the public sphere should operate? Or, more broadly, what do the media contribute to the achievement of a public life that is adequate to the ideal of democratic politics? This is a vast question, which can be analysed on many different scales: although Habermas and many others formulated it on the scale of the nation state, it has become increasingly clear that it needs to be formulated also, perhaps even primarily, on an international scale. We return to the question of the 'international public sphere' later.

Habermas and the public sphere: framing the debate

It remains useful, however, to start out from a consideration of Habermas's original arguments and the criticisms that have been made of them. For, in spite of those criticisms, the underlying question of *democratic adequacy* which Habermas addresses with regard to media organisations remains of central importance.[2] This question has an ethical basis. Put at its simplest, Habermas starts from the principle that we need a democratic public sphere, a space of democratic exchange, based on 'procedures whereby those affected by general social norms and collective political decisions can have a say in their formulation, stipulation, and adoption' (Benhabib 1992: 87). Habermas, in effect, insists that we must evaluate the workings of media organisations and one criterion of evaluation is whether they enable people to debate and decide the issues that affect their lives: in other words, democratic participation.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989a) Habermas offers a historical account of the growth of modern mass media. His position is certainly not an unsophisticated rejection of 'mass media' simply on the grounds that they perform a 'mass' function. His argument rather is that, gradually from the mid-nineteenth century onwards and for a number of reasons, large-scale media (the press, radio and television) caused a deformation, or 'refeudalisation', of the early modern bourgeois public sphere (for a useful synopsis, see Calhoun 1992b). Habermas locates that original model of the public sphere in early modern institutions that developed in the metropolitan centres of, particularly, eighteenth-century Britain: for example, the London coffee-houses where citizens met to discuss issues of the day.

Habermas's analysis of how such institutions *initially* came to function as an effective public sphere is complex: for example, the growth of a literary public sphere (connected with the coffee-houses and associated magazines and journals) and the development of a sphere of private life that was both autonomous from central powerful institutions and separate from the public sphere itself. In this way, Habermas argued, all citizens who met certain entry qualifications (a crucial point, as we will see) could debate public issues freely and on an equal basis; detailed differences in their private circumstances were 'bracketed out'.

Habermas's account of why later historical circumstances, including the development of the mass media, led to the *decline* of this early public sphere is equally complex, but two reasons stand out. First, since the growth of mass media led to the expansion of access to the existing public sphere, inequalities in private circumstances could no longer be bracketed out: the public sphere ceased to be a space for debating the 'common' interest and became instead a site of negotiations between different interest groups. Second, the proper functioning of the public sphere (rational, disinterested debate) came increasingly to be dominated by commercially driven consumption as well as (the first point) by the perspective of the private family realm. Here, Habermas offers a subtle account of the social impacts of the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century welfare state where matters of private good became absorbed in the state's domain. The overall result, according to Habermas, was that the separation between the domestic and the public (which underlay the original bourgeois public sphere) collapsed, and the mass media became in Habermas's phrase 'a secondary realm of intimacy', communicating direct to private individuals in their homes and bypassing the original public sphere entirely.

The weaknesses of Habermas's argument have been noted by many writers (see especially the essays in Calhoun (ed.) 1992a) and acknowledged by Habermas himself (1993). It has been criticised, first, on historical grounds: that an original, fully participatory public sphere, as depicted by Habermas, probably never existed and that his picture of unfettered debate in the London coffee-houses and literary society is an unhelpful idealisation (Schudson 1992); alternatively, that the massification of the media did not have the disastrous impact on public debate that Habermas claims it did (see Curran 1991: 38–46 on the nineteenth-century British press). There have been other major criticisms, influenced by philosophical considerations, which have attacked the very basis of Habermas's position. Even if the bourgeois public sphere did exist as Habermas claims, it was far from being an ideal. On the contrary, it was based upon important *exclusions*: the exclusion of women, the poor, the uneducated, ethnic minorities, and so on (see especially Benhabib 1992, Fraser 1992).

The problem with Habermas's original account, then, is quite fundamental: that by insisting that the ideal public sphere should be based on the bracketing out of 'private' difference (see above), he ignores the social forces that determine *which* differences are bracketed out (the question of 'entry qualifications' again). 'Any public sphere', as Calhoun argues, 'is necessarily a socially organised field, with characteristic lines of division' (Calhoun 1992b: 38; cf. Stallybrass and White 1986: 97–9). There are, accordingly, legitimate conflicts about the basis on which public spheres are formed: who they include and who they do not, and on what terms. Questions about the 'terms' of debate within the public sphere link back to the more direct question of who can participate in that debate. A major feminist critique of Habermas, for example (Benhabib 1992, Fraser 1992) has been that, by

over-emphasising the importance of 'rational' debate in the public sphere, he fails to confront the distortions around who has been seen as 'qualified' to take part in 'rational' debate: the historic discrimination against women's right to be considered as 'rational' subjects on the same terms as men. A parallel argument could be developed concerning discrimination based on racial stereotypes. To raise these issues is to question Habermas's argument at a fundamental level.

There is an underlying point here: that we need to analyse the pre-existing social inequalities which influence *how* particular public spheres come to be formed. This point is central to Negt and Kluge's early (1993) attack on Habermas for ignoring the existence and importance of '*counter*-public spheres' (for example, based on working-class cultures).[3] It also underlies Seyla Benhabib's (1992) argument for the need to recognise 'multiple public spheres'. The idea of multiple public spheres raises a difficulty of its own: how are the relations between multiple public spheres to be understood without falling back on the idea of an overarching public sphere where differences are negotiated and the possibility of common interests explored (cf. Garnham 1992)? Even so, it is now clear that Habermas's original account severely underestimated the complexity of the primary question which he raised: how should the mediated public sphere be analysed and evaluated?

Before moving on to consider aspects of this complexity in greater detail, it is worth noting some further criticisms that have been made of Habermas's public-sphere argument. These are important since they are relevant also to the work of other media analysts who have built upon his work (for example, Kellner 1990). Two criticisms in particular are worth bringing out: in different ways, they attack the very basis of all public-sphere arguments.

The first, developed by John Thompson (1993, 1995), is that the whole structure of Habermas's public-sphere argument is out of date. Habermas uses as his reference-point a public sphere based around face-to-face discussion and contact. But surely, Thompson argues, in contemporary societies which are massively complex and dispersed, face-to-face discussion is no longer, even in principle, a possible basis for public discourse? Any contemporary public sphere is necessarily based on communication at a distance, that is, mediated communication. Thompson claims that Habermas's whole argument relies on judging contemporary mass media by standards which were appropriate to much smaller societies, but are now, in the media age, irrelevant. A similar argument has been developed by Paddy Scannell (1989, 1996; cf. Scannell and Cardiff 1991). The mass media, Scannell has claimed, should be understood, not as some defective version of earlier face-to-face public communication, but as the basis for an entirely *new type* of public sphere, based on communication at a distance. The modern media, from this perspective, are understood as enabling the distribution of new forms of 'communicative entitlement' to vast, dispersed populations who have no physical contact with each other.

This argument for the irrelevance of Habermas's model is, however

overstated, since (cf. Curran 1991: 45) it tends implicitly to reproduce a liberal model of the media as an unproblematic space of democratic exchange. Yet it was exactly this liberal model of the media that Habermas's argument challenged. As Nicholas Garnham has put it (in a powerful restatement of the core of the Habermasian argument), *some* notion of 'the reciprocal duties inherent in a communicative space that is physically shared' is necessary even for contemporary societies that are massively dispersed and media-saturated (1992: 367).

A second, and related, criticism is that public-sphere arguments underestimate the positive contribution of the mass media to politics and the public sphere. This is in fact an argument towards which Habermas himself has become increasingly sympathetic. Habermas (1997) no longer holds his earlier view of media audiences as uncritical (Habermas 1989b). He has also reconceived the media and the public sphere in a more optimistic way. The public sphere is now deemed to include civil society, with its infrastructure of self-organised groups, rather than being merely an aggregation of individuals constituted as a public. The role of the media is now conceived as that of communicating the ideas, perspectives and solutions of groups in civil society to the political system, and of staging a reciprocal debate within a reintegrated public. Yet despite this shift (discussed more fully in Chapter 6), Habermas remains pessimistic about the ability of the mass media to fulfil its democratic role in the light of what 'the sociology of mass communication' reveals about the distorting effect of 'administrative and social power' (Habermas 1997: 378).

However, some writers in the sociology of mass communicatin are more sanguine. John Corner (1995: 41–52), in discussing television's relation to politics, aims to reorientate debates about the 'ideological' biases of television towards 'a more direct engagement with the present modes of television-within-politics and politics-within-television' (1995: 43). Corner's argument, in effect, is that, even if there are some negative aspects of television's representation of politics (he is discussing British television specifically), *the net effect* of television's involvement in the coverage of politics is positive. Television, he claims (1995: 44–5), has made possible the popular dissemination of 'regular political information'; television journalism has an increasingly important role in exerting pressure on vested interests (such as the state, the police, and so on); and the sheer vastness and speed of media coverage has reduced the possibility of successful information management by those same vested interests. As the preceding argument about the limits of media autonomy and source pluralism indicates, Corner risks overstating the positive. Even so, his basic point – that the balance sheet of the media's effects on democratic politics is a complicated one – is well made.

Arguments for the countervailing positive effects of the media's operations can be developed at a more specific level also. Scannell and Cardiff (1991) in their historical account of the BBC – developed very much *against* ideological critiques of the mass media, such as Habermas's (Scannell 1988, 1989) – have analysed how, compared with the previous style of public political meeting, the mass media required a more intimate form of address. This form of address gradually came to legitimate the public role of 'ordinary' voices and 'ordinary' ways of speaking. Parallel analyses have been made of more recent forms of talk on television (Tolson 1991, Corner 1995: 51) such as BBC2's *Video Diaries* and the growth of talk shows on controversial issues where 'ordinary people' are encouraged to challenge the positions of 'experts' (Livingstone and Lunt 1994). A variation on such arguments can be developed from particular crisis situations where the media have played a large role in undermining or threatening authoritarian rule (see, for example, Lull 1991, on China).[4]

Detailed arguments based on the positive potential of media outputs could be multiplied, but we need instead to review the general shape of the argument on the mediated public sphere so far. There are powerful arguments against Habermas's original historical analysis of the public sphere. Not only does it exclude some crucial issues about access and representation. It also, at least in its original formulation, takes insufficient account of how mediated communication (that transcends face-to-face contexts) is necessary in contemporary societies. We need also, as Scannell and Corner suggest, to be cautious before rushing to conclude that the overall social impacts of the mass media for democratic politics are negative: there is a large number of issues to be considered on both the positive and the negative sides.

As mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, however, there are fundamental *ethical* issues at stake as well – above all, the issue of democratic participation – and it is here that Habermas's public-sphere argument (even if in a modified form) remains central. It provides an indispensable perspective on the operations of media organisations, since it insists that we continually evaluate the media for what they contribute to our lives *as citizens*, as active participants in the public sphere (Golding 1990). 'Citizenship' is certainly a complex concept in contemporary societies,[5] but we cannot do without it. Nor can 'citizenship' be collapsed into the process of 'consumption'. Satisfying people's right to democratic *participation* involves more than providing ever-wider consumer choice between products.[6]

As noted earlier, some analysis of 'the reciprocal duties inherent in a communicative space' (Garnham) remains vital even in media-saturated societies where the influence of market forces on the media sphere is extensive. The key issue is *how* that analysis should be formulated: just as traditional political economy formulations have been debated and revised earlier in this chapter, so here there is need to complicate and refine related public-sphere arguments. This process of complication is what we now explore: first by looking at specific areas, and then by briefly reassessing the public-sphere formulation as a whole.

Complicating the public-sphere debate

Any current reformulation of the public-sphere argument must take account of a number of factors which, we will argue, have complicated, but not made redundant, the terms of that debate: first, the contributions of fictional material to the contemporary public sphere; second, the globalisation (or at least potential globalisation) of the public sphere in the context of global politics and the massive intensification of cross-border media flows; and, third, the extension of the public-sphere debate to encompass computer-mediated communication, particularly the Internet and the World Wide Web. This section discusses each of these in turn.

Media fictions

Habermas's formulation of the 'public-sphere' concept – and many of the debates around it – has focused on *rational* debate, and a particular, rather narrow definition of what constitutes 'rationality'. Rationality in this context has generally been associated with the formal debate of formal matters, such as how society should be organised and how individuals, groups and institutions should behave. But such formulations exclude more obviously emotive matters which cannot be reduced to rational formulation: identification, imagination, loyalty, even love. Yet these are a vital part of public life and political allegiance. Excluded also are articulations of social issues outside conventional forms of debate: for example, the highlighting of social issues and controversies in television soap operas. It is unhelpful in discussing the mediated public sphere to separate artificially areas of 'fact' (news, documentary, discussion) from areas of 'fiction' (drama, sport, and more generally entertainment) (cf. Curran 1991, Dahlgren 1995). We cannot simply reduce the non-factual aspects of media outputs to 'only entertainment' (Dyer 1992).

The case of television soap operas is particularly interesting since this genre of mass entertainment has consistently been denigrated (on this, see Hobson 1982, Allen 1985, Geraghty 1991). Yet, increasingly, in Britain at least, they have come to be acknowledged not only as entertainment nor even just as important media rituals, but also as spaces where difficult social issues can be broached and debate stimulated: for example, the status of ethnic minorities (and their integration, or otherwise, into mainly white communities), the representation of gay and lesbian relationships (Geraghty 1995). The most recent example is the issue of transsexuality, portrayed by the extremely popular British soap *Coronation Street* since late 1997. This 'public-sphere' function of media fictions has begun to be recognised by the state itself: Britain's Labour government, for example, has asked soap production companies to address issues around drug education in their programmes.

Questions remain, certainly, about the quality of the public 'debate' stimulated through soap plots, let alone about the terms of debate: who is fairly represented, and who is not. But it is clear that fictional spaces such as soap operas can no longer be dismissed as irrelevant to our understanding of the public sphere. On the contrary, they can be crucial to ongoing processes of national and cultural self-definition: for example, in focusing debates and tensions about national and local identity (see for example Miller 1995 on Trinidad, Abu-Lughod 1995 on Egypt). In this broader context, the public-sphere argument is subtly transformed: from being solely about the contents of debate in the public domain to encompassing the media's role in stimulating *private* (as well as public) debate through their prominent influence over contemporary definitions of 'the social' (Hall 1977, Curran 1982).[7] This extends earlier analysis of 'agenda-setting' in the media news (McCombs and Shaw 1972) into the fictional realm.

A similar argument can be made in relation to other non-factual (that is, imaginative) media forms: film, music, and so on. There is only space to discuss music here. Music, perhaps, is the type of 'media fiction' most recognised for its potential to express overt resistance to dominant structures and ideologies (Hebdige 1979, 1987, Garofalo (ed.) 1992, Gilroy 1992, 1993, Lipsitz 1994). This applies to many different musical forms, but one area of popular music in particular has attracted attention: rap music and hiphop. Rap music, in the often cited words attributed to Chuck D, formerly of the group Public Enemy, 'is the CNN black people never had' (quoted in Cross 1993: 206). This is no empty metaphor, and other rap musicians have emphasised how the verbal content of rap was developed in conscious distinction from other musical forms. According to The Watts Prophets (quoted in Cross 1993: 108): 'we realised that disco music was drowning out the spoken word ... we wanted to bring the word back out in front'. While it would be misleading to suggest that rap music has always operated as a counter-public sphere,[8] it has clearly been productive in addressing a number of issues affecting the African-American community in the USA and elsewhere, including 'black-on-black' violence, racism, black nationalism, and so on. Some rap has explicitly attempted to speak out against violence and provide alternative role models for black youth (Rose 1994). And, more generally, rap and hiphop – in various hybrid forms – continue to have a public-sphere function in many countries: for example, in the context of the racial politics of 1990s Britain (the music of Asian Dub Foundation and others).

This argument could be extended to other media (for example, film), but it should already be clear that the public-sphere debate cannot be adequately reformulated without considering fictional forms. Contemporary, highly dispersed societies need not just (factual) news but (fictional) 'images ... of what living is now like' (Williams 1975: 9). Entertainment media, as well as news media, are therefore essential to a democratically adequate public sphere and fundamentally similar issues of access and participation

apply to them as they do more obviously in the area of formal, 'rational' debate. Entertainment 'needs to give adequate expression to the full range of cultural-political values in society' (Curran 1991: 34). If so, then expanding our notion of the public sphere to encompass media fictions does not fundamentally alter the terms of the debate. There are of course complexities of detail (for example, how do we formulate the proper boundaries between media fact and media fiction so as not to lose sight of the ethical obligations not to misrepresent fiction as fact?), but these complexities do not alter the basic argument that the public sphere necessarily includes both media facts and media fictions.

The international public sphere

The complications raised by the internationalising of the public sphere are perhaps more fundamental since they change the geographic scale, and therefore the organisational issues, on which public-sphere debates need to focus. Debates about possible 'infrastructures' of the international public sphere add another dimension to the question we started from (how should media organisations work in order to contribute to a public sphere?). In addition, we must ask: what form should, or even can, an international public sphere take?

The question of infrastructure cannot be resolved here, but some consideration of such issues is necessary, if the complexity of public-sphere debates at the international level is to be fully appreciated. What is the role, for example, of non-commercial non-government organisations (NGOs)? How is the role of sovereign states changing – both politically and in terms of their capability (if any) to influence global media flows?

Until quite recently debates concerning the public sphere were formulated in terms of the sovereign nation state. But an exclusively national formulation has now been rendered inadequate by many complex forces, summed up in the term 'globalisation'; whether economic globalisation (Wallerstein 1980) or cultural globalisation (Featherstone (ed.) 1990, Robertson 1992, Sklair 1995). In this context, an important debate has emerged about the form of an 'international civil society' or an international (or even global) public sphere.[9] It is important to maintain here the distinction between the international (or transnational) on the one hand, and the truly global on the other. As has been argued, for example by the geographer Doreen Massey (1994), globalising forces do *not* have identical impacts across the world. They have what she calls a 'power-geometry' which is inherently *uneven*. Any transnational public sphere is (for the foreseeable future at least) unlikely to be equally open to all countries and regions of the world, or at least to be so on the same terms. Given this, Habermas's *ideal* of the public sphere – as a space of free and fully open democratic exchange – remains a crucial reference-point.

There are some reasons to be cautious about the idea of an international public sphere. First, even if there are some institutional structures which may approximate to it (for example, the UN or practices of international NGOs, discussed below), the extent to which they are embedded in social or cultural allegiances that are genuinely transnational (as the idea of an international public sphere would imply) is open to doubt.[10] Even so, there is no doubt we need to work from the starting-point that people can operate in public spheres on a number of different levels (not only national, but international and, of course, local as well). As Braman (1997) has put it, we need to think at the international level of a number of 'interpenetrated' public spheres.

Another reason for caution about what the 'international public sphere' actually means is uncertainty about the continued role of the nation state in any international public sphere. In recent decades the nation state has lost sovereignty upwards to supranational institutions (for example, the UN, the EC, the World Bank and the IMF) and for different reasons downwards to regional ones (Lipschitz 1992, Braman 1995). But at the same time supranational institutions cannot straightforwardly rely on an enforceable legal framework through which to implement political decisions at the international level. As a result, John Keane (1991: 135–40) has argued that, if a global public sphere is to develop, it cannot do so simply through international declarations and statements of governments' intent. An international civil society, he has argued, requires to be 'enriched from below' (Keane 1991: 138), for example by organisations that operate within or across state borders, such as international NGOs (charities, lobby groups, and so on).

At the same time, other writers have argued that the nation state has been made irrelevant by the immense growth of international trade in goods and international consumption of media and cultural products (see for example Strange 1994, Ohmae 1990). The result, they claim, is an effectively border-free world, best understood not in terms of the political structures of nation states, but in terms of the actions of *consumers*, dispersed across the globe. National, that is political, loyalties compete with brand loyalties as the basis for constructing social and individual identities.

Such arguments are, however, exaggerated. Certainly, it is important to acknowledge the 'cultural complexity' (Hannerz 1995) that results from the international flow of goods and cultural products. But we need to ask: what type of collective identity does wearing Nike trainers actually deliver? Are such consumption-based identities really alternatives to identities based on political position or organised social action, and, even if they are taken to be, *should* they be? Such individualistic consumption-based identities may actually work to undermine other socially grounded identities. But, even if they do not, there are strong reasons for doubting whether consumption identities (what you wear, and so on) are even comparable to other new forms of international collective identity (focused around environmentalism, feminism, ethnic connections, religion).[11] The suspiciously easy argument

that global consumerism makes redundant the construction of an international political infrastructure – an international public sphere – must be treated with great scepticism.

The role of the state in the construction of an international public sphere – on which older public-sphere debates have focused – is clearly complex. There is a danger of underestimating the continuing role of the state at national and international levels (Hirst and Thompson 1996). The state, none the less, is dependent upon non-state actors in many different and complex ways. We need therefore to formulate these issues in terms of two levels: first the society of states and then 'transnational [civil] society', the web of organisations, groups and individuals pursuing their interests partly through various transnational (but non-state) organisations (Rosenau 1990).

It is worth considering how this transnational society works in more detail, since it is essential to any model of the international public sphere. In fact, it can be argued that it is largely through the existence of international NGOs – the focus which they provide for connections between local individuals and groups – that an international public sphere has come into being (cf. Keane 1991). New political spaces or 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) have developed across national boundaries. The global distribution of *media* (and the international *media profile* of NGOs such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth) has of course been central to this spread of global loyalties. Four fields of political and media activism can perhaps be mentioned as particularly important: the environment, human rights, the rights of indigenous people and global militarism. As knowledge communities (or 'epistemic communities': Haas 1992), the international NGOs are major participants in the definition of issues at national and international levels, using the media as an essential tool for changing popular attitudes and influencing not just states and supranational institutions, but also transnational corporations. In the absence of strong institutional structures linking nation states,[12] it is NGOs (that is, the large numbers of people across the world who work in them or belong to them) which are at present central in any moves towards the construction of an international public sphere.

The actions of NGOs, however, remain only a small part of wider global cultural flows (Hannerz 1996): fashion, television, films, music, news, financial information, and so on. Whereas in the restricted political arenas in which NGOs deal (the UN, GATT, and so on) it is uncontestable that public-sphere issues such as adequacy of representation, freedom of access and debate apply, this is much less clear in relation to wider global cultural flows. There is international trade in cultural products on a vast scale (with many complex regional and local levels of determination: see, for example, Sinclair et al. 1996), but there *is* no single 'space' which plausibly operates at present as a cultural or public sphere on a global level. Occasional global media events (sporting or political: the World Cup, President Clinton's Grand Jury testimony) seem to focus world attention, but they are hardly

sufficient to constitute a permanent public sphere. To extend the public-sphere argument (in a broad sense, which covers both 'fictional' and 'factual' media) to a world scale involves an increase in complexity for which studies of national media provide little precedent. Even so, as we will argue below, that does not mean that the political and ethical concerns underlying Habermas's public-sphere argument are irrelevant on this wider scale. It means only that we have to keep separate (1) the manageable question of how to judge today's global media infrastructure from (2) the much larger, and as yet barely manageable, question of how that global media infrastructure needs to operate. The necessity for this separation of questions will become even clearer when we look at a fast-growing sector of the international public sphere: the Internet.

The Internet

The growth of the Internet and of hyped ideology around its development could change the terms of public-sphere debates. Even though explicit references to Habermas are limited (but cf. Rheingold 1994: 281–9), implicit in this ideology is the idea that the Internet will exacerbate the internationalisation of communication and will give access to information to those in the periphery. It has been suggested that not only does the Internet's basis in existing telecommunications networks make it from the outset an international space, but that more fundamentally it is already structured as a communications space which in principle vast numbers of people worldwide can not only access, but send messages through. Its technology determines that, *in principle at least*, it is a many-to-many medium, not a one-to-many medium. This has suggested to many a radical break from the era of centralised broadcasting. In the words of one of its more cautious proselytisers, the Internet is a medium in which 'every citizen can broadcast to every citizen' (Rheingold 1994: 14). If this is true, perhaps Habermas's public-sphere argument can be revived in something like its original form, electronic media for the first time making possible a genuine public space of exchange which operates at a distance.

The actual position is, however, much more complicated. First, the ideology in question about the Internet, and cyberspace generally, contains its fair share of the mythical and needs to be deconstructed. Second – and this is a crucial point – those positive rhetorics do *not* necessarily advocate anything similar to Habermas's public-sphere argument; on the contrary, they embrace the commercial aspects of the Internet (and particularly the World Wide Web) in a way that is directly at odds with the very basis on which public-sphere arguments can be built. Third, the reality of the Internet (as it is likely to be experienced by its users) may be very different from such rhetorical ideals, and no less determined by the economics of production and distribution than is, say, global satellite television.

In spite of these complexities and uncertainties, the main lines of the argument can already be traced. The best starting-point is to examine the positive rhetoric about the Internet and cyberspace generally: the claims for its potential as a new type of communications space. There is a vast literature here, both popular and academic. Common to most of it is the vision of the Internet as representing a new era in communications, a break with the past, a qualitative change (Kahin and Wilson (eds) 1997: vii). Technological changes (not only the Internet's infrastructure, but the digitalisation of all possible media contents and massive increases in speed and precision of information transmission, for example, through fibre-optic cables) will according to many writers bring major social change (for example, Negroponte 1995). Such technological and social change requires, it is argued, a new way of thinking about communication.

Much of this positive rhetoric tends to essentialize the Internet as a single process or thing, rather than encourage its detailed analysis (Loader 1997: 5). The Internet, it is claimed, will enhance freedom; it is the opening, or 'frontier', onto new possibilities for humanity, which transcend existing social relations. By contrast with existing corrupt forms of 'representative' democracy, the Internet's communication space makes possible a new paradigm of 'direct' democracy, an electronically mediated return to the original Greek paradigm. Internet technology, it is argued, opens up an electronic 'agora' or democratic meeting-place free from territorial, or even social, constraints.

One feature of this ideology is that it tends to operate at some distance from the *actual* social, economic and geographical processes in which new media technologies are embedded. We will return to this point in detail later. That neglect is however combined with a particular broad vision of what the Internet's overall impact on existing social organisation will be. First, building on the point that the Internet's infrastructure (since based on international telecommunications) is intrinsically global (Gore 1994: 7), it is argued that the Internet removes limitations of geography (Negroponte 1995: 165; Johnson and Post 1997: 6). It transforms the existing highly unequal geopolitics of information (Negroponte 1996), empowering individuals and groups on the socio-economic and geographical margins (Poster 1995, Turkle 1995, Johnson and Post 1997). Second, it is argued that the interactivity and decentralisation built into the very technology of the Internet makes it *inherently* democratic, transforming a generation of media couch-potatoes into active on-line producers (Rushkoff 1994, Negroponte 1995, Goodwin 1996). This new cultural productivity, it is argued, cannot be controlled because there is no 'centre' from which to exercise the control; and in any case the volume of information on the Internet makes control impossible even in principle (Johnson and Post 1997). Third, this vision of the Internet democracy is often combined with a rejection of existing political structures, and in particular with anti-statism. The state, it is argued, loses its legitimacy in the on-line world (Johnson and Post 1997: 10) and

will slowly wither away (Negroponte 1995: 230, Barlow 1996). To this extent, positive visions of the Internet's political implications resonate with wider claims about the irrelevance of the nation state in global capitalism (see pp. 46–9). Fourth, this vision of social change is reinforced by an even broader claim by some writers: that there is a necessary and beneficial link between global capitalism (as the 'best' system of economic organisation) and the Internet (as the 'best', and most open, communications space). The virtual agora, as in ancient Greece, is both marketplace and meeting-place, without any apparent tension between those economic and political functions.

Given all this, it is not surprising that advocates of the Internet are usually hostile to the idea that the Internet should be regulated by state or quasi-state institutions in any way at all. Shaping the growth of the Internet from the outside in order to make it more democratic is therefore rejected out of hand, even though it is precisely the idea of thinking politically about how the Internet (or other media) *should* operate that is at the heart of public-sphere arguments. The Internet is seen as 'naturally' democratic, an already functioning 'public sphere', which needs no political intervention to ensure that its reality lives up to its ideals. There is no room, or need, for policy intervention, even in principle, on this view. Most positive discourse about the Internet is therefore fundamentally at odds with public-sphere arguments, as previously mounted, whose very basis is the public critique of existing media institutions. There is, then, no consensus that public-sphere arguments are even relevant to the Internet. If a public-sphere argument is to be developed, it must be constructed from first principles.

First, there is the question of access, already discussed. Second, the unequal geographic distribution of Internet hosts and Internet use is not necessarily a temporary imbalance which will automatically be corrected, as history marches on. It parallels the uneven (and historically long-standing) concentration of telecommunications infrastructure in the West, particularly the US (Mansell 1993).

A third issue is that, in terms of how the Internet, and particularly the World Wide Web, will appear to most users, it is the commercial dimension which may be most apparent: that is, either electronic commerce and promotion, or the availability of information such as travel, weather, financial data, which is basic to the functioning of commerce (Schiller 1995, Stallabrass 1995). This indeed was how US Vice-President Al Gore described it in his much-lauded 'Global Information Infrastructure' speech in 1994: '[the Internet] will make possible a global information marketplace, where consumers can buy and sell products' (quoted, Schiller 1995: 17). If so, the 'public-sphere' aspects of the Internet (as an open space for democratic *exchange* of information and debate) may prove less apparent to most users than its purely commercial aspects. This is not merely likely, but virtually *inevitable*, according to radical analysts of global communications. Within that perspective, global media have to be seen as a process of global

domination by a limited number of transnational corporations whose main focus lies in the West (Bagdikian 1992, 1997, Schiller 1996, Herman and McChesney 1997, Mowlanda 1997, McChesney 1998). If so, the Internet, far from constituting an unprecedented 'open' space for communicative exchange, constitutes an unprecedented opportunity for commercial expansion, whereby economies of scale can be exploited to strengthen existing patterns of conglomeration in the global communications industry (Herman and McChesney 1997).

The ideology of the Internet's inherently free and democratic nature fits well with the objective of commercial interests in ensuring that the Internet marketplace remains free from political interference of any sort: this, in effect, is a new version of market-oriented liberalism. This discourse has been massively strengthened by the general global success in the 1980s and 1990s of market liberalism, reflected specifically in relation to the Internet by the US's strongly deregulatory Telecommunications Act of 1996. There are, however, some radical critiques of how the Internet operates and is likely to operate, and of the potential conflicts between its commercial and communicative aspects. Within Internet ideology there is *no space* for debate about how the Internet should operate; it is intrinsically good and interference with it is intrinsically bad. It is only within the second, radical discourse that issues of democracy and power can arise at all even as issues, which explains why such issues are in fact rarely debated publicly (McChesney 1997). Yet such lack of debate arguably puts the whole survival of the public sphere at risk (Herman and McChesney 1997: 198).

To insist on the need for a public-sphere debate in relation to the Internet, the 'information superhighway', and cyberspace generally, involves (as it has in relation to earlier media) contesting market liberalism head on. Market forces are *not* intrinsically 'free', since the 'hidden' costs of advertising and so on are simply passed on to consumers through higher prices. Nor are market forces necessarily the means of maximising freedom of choice in cultural consumption: 'choice is always pre-structured by the conditions of competition' (Curran 1996a: 94), including the cost of market entry, effective access to distribution and differential scale economies. The result of commercial pressures is not necessarily greater choice, but greater homogenisation (see, for example, Blumler 1991). And, in any case, it is *not freedom of consumption* that is the issue in relation to the Internet or any other communication space, but *freedom of expression and debate*: the freedom to speak and the opportunity to listen. Those who praise the Internet cannot have it both ways: the Internet either has the potential to be a genuine space of democratic exchange (a true public sphere), in which case inequalities of power, access and representation must be addressed, or it does not. Excited visions of 'virtual democracy' must at some point be brought to democratic account.

Renewing the public-sphere debate

The terms of the public sphere are in need of radical renewal to take account of a new media world: of vastly increased media outputs (covering both factual and fictional material), greatly intensified cross-border media flows, and (in the Internet) a decentred, or apparently decentred, communications space different from any that has gone before. But that does not mean that the framework of original public-sphere debates can safely be shelved; on the contrary, the expansion of the media universe makes it all the more vital as a reference-point.

A number of media theorists have in recent years sought to develop a revised model of the public sphere (Curran 1991, 1996a, Keane 1991, Dahlgren 1995). Each of them has in different ways sought to distance himself from the idea that the public sphere can only operate through public media institutions. There is a need, Curran has argued, for a 'highly differentiated media system' (1996a: 106) with a private-enterprise sector, a professional sector, a civic sector and a social-market sector distributed around a public-service sector 'core' (Curran 1996a). Dahlgren has similarly argued for the need within the media public sphere for both 'the common domain' (in which the public sector has an essential role) and 'the advocacy domain' (compare Curran's 'civic sector') (Dahlgren 1995: 155–6). This 'multi-perspectival'[13] approach to imagining the public sphere is necessary to reflect the complexity of contemporary societies: the need for private citizens both to be able to express their own views and to come together with others to reach a common view (Curran 1996a: 103–12).

This insistence on institutional plurality in no way involves conceding that issues of *public interest* are of less relevance to contemporary media. Not only does some public institutional involvement in media production remain at the core of these analyses, but the operations of the whole media sector, including the private-enterprise sector, are seen still as matters of central public concern. While acknowledging the practical role of market provision, these models reject entirely the neo-liberal notion that 'the market' is a sphere best left free from public intervention. Indeed the democratic state – viewed in one version of radical political economy as a threat to popular freedom of expression – is viewed in another version as a positive agency for securing media diversity and public access (Curran 1996c, 1998, Humphreys 1996).

Whether this last is accepted or not, there is a public interest in how the media functions (whether at local, national or global levels). There are three public functions of the media which it is helpful to separate (Curran 1996a): first, in giving the public 'access to a diversity of values and perspectives' (Curran 1996a: 103), whether in entertainment or in news and current affairs coverage. Second, the media must function as an agency of representation, enabling the whole range of individuals and groups to

express alternative viewpoints, and (conversely) enabling others to hear those viewpoints. Third, the media must assist in society's realisation of its common goals, operating in effect as a common forum for the exchange of views and helping the formulation of decisions. 'Society' is in quotes here, since the argument applies equally to societies on a national scale and to the growing transnational civil society. It is clear that each of these functions can be enhanced by having a plurality of media production, not just a state sector. But, equally important, it is not true that the market is the best means of providing that plurality (Curran 1991, Keane 1991). The neo-liberal equation of 'free markets' with 'free communications' (so prominent, for example, among proselytisers of the Internet or the unfettered global spread of satellite television) is mythical. The same point can be made in terms of the concept of access. Whatever the value of producers' free access to media markets or consumers' free access to media products, those types of 'access' are not equivalent – or even comparable to – 'access' in the sense relevant to public-sphere debates: free access of individuals and groups to the views and cultural productions of their own constituency (i.e. the means of cultural and political self-expression) and free access to participate in shared regional, national or international debate.

This point can be pushed further. The media, as forms of communication at a distance, raise issues of participation (cf. Barbrook and Cameron 1995, Curran 1996c) which are simply not reducible to questions of consumer choice. It is not normally an issue, let alone an issue of public importance, whether you had the opportunity to participate in the production of the clothes you wear. It is an issue, and one of fundamental public importance, what opportunities you had to participate in the representation to others of your living conditions, your opinions, your forms of cultural expression. The latter are fundamentally issues not merely of choice, but of control; they are issues of freedom, which must be addressed at the social level.

That is why the public-sphere debate, initiated in very different circumstances by Habermas, remains of relevance today. It does so, in spite of a number of difficulties which we have noted in this chapter: in particular, the difficulty at the international level of establishing what is the appropriate infrastructure for an international public sphere and by what means and on the basis of what authority transnational media flows should be regulated; and the difficulty (in relation to the Internet) of reaching agreement that public-sphere issues are relevant at all. The public-sphere debate remains important also as a framework, or horizon, for the other areas of research into media organisations discussed in the first two parts of this chapter. For it is the suspicion that the media sphere (on its various levels) does not necessarily operate as it should that is a central motivation for researching how in practice media organisations work.

Notes

1 At the time of writing, the Goldsmiths Media Group consisted of Nick Couldry, James Curran, Aeron Davis, David Hesmondhalgh, Wilma de Jong, Herbert Pimlott and Korinna Patelis.
2 See for example Benhabib (1992), Fraser (1992), Garnham (1992), Dahlgren (1995), McGuigan (1996).
3 For a recent consideration of their arguments, see M. Hansen (1993).
4 Such cases are, however, complex, and do not necessarily provide an argument for the benign influence of large-scale national media. See for example Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994), an important study of the role of 'small media' in the Iranian Revolution, in helping to topple the Shah's regime, which was supported by the state media.
5 For a recent updating of the debate, see Clarke (1996).
6 To emphasise our role as 'citizens' rather than our role as 'consumers' in this context does not mean neglecting the complexity and symbolic importance of consumption (see especially Miller, 1987).
7 It was precisely Habermas's artificial exclusion of this dimension that made it possible for him to criticise modern media for creating 'a secondary realm of intimacy'.
8 Indeed some aspects of some rap music have been attacked for reinforcing anti-social behaviour: sexism, homophobia, and so on.
9 The significance of the media has often been underestimated in this debate (for example, Luard 1990, Peterson 1992, Bull 1997).
10 See for example, Smith (1990), Peterson (1992), Tomlinson (1997).
11 See generally Beck (1992).
12 As envisaged for example by Sakomoto (1991), Held (1993).
13 Dahlgren (1995: 156), cf Curran (1996a: 106).

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Media Organisations in Society

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A member of the Hodder Headline Group
LONDON
Co-published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press Inc., New York