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U N I V E R S I T Y

THE PUBLIC SPHERE, THE MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

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Historically, here and elsewhere, the media debate has been polarised between the traditional liberal position and Marxist collectivist critiques of it. Over the last few years, however, British cultural theorists have brought new life to this moribund debate through their development of a 'radical democratic' approach. It evolved in the wake of the popular rejection of communist regimes globally and in response to the projection of this by major Western governments as the triumph of capitalism. Many of its proponents try to redress the socialist theoretical vacuum following these events by returning to some of the fundamental principles of democracy and attempting to establish the conditions for their realisation in complex modern societies.

Central to much of this work is the concept of the public sphere - an accessible and independent realm in which each voice is equal to one. The public sphere is the means by which democratic decisions are reached. Re-examinations of theories of the public sphere have inspired new and innovative ways of examining current developments in the media and have been used to overcome the theoretical deadlocks of the past. It is on these explorations into the meaning of the public sphere for democratic media development that I will focus in this article. I will then assess their applicability to South Africa.

For many the degree to which the mass media function as a public sphere, representative of the citizenry and accessible to all, serves as a key barometer of democracy within a polity. This arises from a lengthy tradition which places the media at the interface between the governors and the governed. From this perspective democracy is a relative concept. The character of a democracy is dependent on the flow of public information. This will determine to what degree the citizenry can take actions based on informed decisions and make government accountable.

From a traditional liberal position the public sphere is an arena between the distinct areas of state and civil society that guarantees the protection of the individual. Liberal theory equates the public sphere with the political domain and the public role of the media is defined in relation to government. The liberal belief in the virtue of civil society's domination over the state, however, has led to a view of the market as the mechanism best suited to meeting the information needs of society. However, the further the market commands information flows

- through conglomeration, privatisation and deregulation - the further it fails to fulfil democratic ideals of equal accessibility and independence. The liberal view, for James Curran (1991:29), fails to take account of the way in which power is exercised through capitalist and patriarchal structures. It ignores the ways in which interests have become organised and collectivised.

Despite such criticism, the liberal media model remains intact. As Nicholas Garnham points out, the left, in all its diversity, has remained trapped in a free press model inherited from the nineteenth century. 'The hold that liberal theory exercised can be judged by the inadequacy of proposals for press reform generated by the Left and the weakness with which such proposals have been pursued'(1986:39).

This is not to suggest that liberal press theories have gone unchallenged. From an orthodox Marxist position, the public sphere in capitalist formations disguises the dominance of bourgeois media but they do not challenge the liberal basis of the public sphere itself. Unable to break out of the liberal state-civil society dichotomy, reform of the public sphere was rejected and socialist transformation regarded as the only solution.

Marxist approaches, Curran contends, are based on the conception of dominant ideology as 'a monolithic rationalisation of dominant material interests. It generally overstates the unity between ideas and economic interests, the internal consistency of dominant discourses, the homogeneity of dominant interests and the extent of ideological domination of subordinate classes' (1991:37). This foreclosed on certain reformist strategies as the weak links in the system were not perceived.

In contrast, and under very different international conditions, the radical democratic approach is highly pragmatic. Curran suggests an innovative solution to overcome the deficiencies of both the orthodox liberal and Marxist approaches and exploits their strengths. He meshes the general market approach with a collectivist approach to democratise the public sphere by making it more representative and accessible.

Rethinking the media as a public sphere, as Curran and others (Dahlgren, 1991, Garnham, 1986) have done, is a useful way of breaking out of the state-civil society polarisation that has dominated media debate (Garnham, 1986:39). Radical democratic theorists reject the way the distinction is made between private and public realms, which underpins the liberal definition of the public sphere. The mediation role of the press and broadcasting is said to extend to all areas where power is exercised over others, the workplace and home (Curran, 1991:32).

Re-examining the Public Sphere

Peter Dahlgren contends that the public sphere should not simply be understood as the processes of public opinion nor as a synonym for the mass media. He draws on Jurgen Habermas, as do Curran and Garnham, to develop the public sphere as 'an analytic category, a conceptual device that, while pointing to a specific social phenomenon can also aid us in analysing and researching the phenomenon... As an analytic category, the bourgeois public sphere consists of a dynamic nexus which links a variety of actors, factors and contexts together in a cohesive theoretic framework' (1991:2).

Habermas' notion of the public sphere refers to a realm between the state and civil society where decisions were publicly reached through rational discourse. He identifies the nineteenth century press in England as the golden era of the public sphere, in which a plurality of ideas was aired in a context free from both state and capital intervention.

But, for Habermas, this becomes undermined through the concentration of media, the dominance of advertising and public relations, which sell ideas rather than debate them. This situation, for Habermas, is compounded by the entry of the state (through anti-monopoloy acts or state-sponsored media) into this realm to prevent the domination of capital, with the devastating effect of blurring the public and private realm.

Peter Dahlgren's (1991:5) and Curran's (1991:42) insightful critiques of Habermas provide a basis for developing the media as a democratic public sphere in capitalist society. Firstly, Habermas overstates his conception of the nineteenth century public sphere as a golden age of rational discourse (Curran, 1991:41; Garnham, 1986:43). Recent historical research indicates that the press, particularly in the latter half of the nineteenth century was factional, insular and limited, consisting of small, polemical, destructively competitive publications.[2] Habermas's portrayal of the bourgeois public sphere, Dahlgren contends, is an 'ideological distortion' and although Habermas reveals its class bias, he neglects to identify its patriarchal character (see also Phillips, 1991:51; Garnham, 1986:4).

An important departure from earlier radical assessments drawing on Habermas in the past is Dahlgren's rejection of his pessimism about the media's public role under advanced capitalism. While not denying its dominance, he highlights the tensions and cleavages in the contemporary public sphere. Neither public broadcasting nor commercial ventures are as monolithic or homogeneous as Habermas suggests. On the other hand Dahlgren draws attention to alternative, popular, informal or oppositional public spheres such as the early radical press, of which Habermas is dismissive. 'Under the periods of liberal and advanced capitalism there have existed other fora which have shaped people's political consciousness,

served as networks for exchange of information, rumour and gossip, and provided setting for cultural expression' (1991:9). The debate on the reconstitution of the media as a democratic public sphere, is opened up by applying these two factors to contemporary media and society.

However, Dahlgren (1991:9) suggests that the 'nexus quality' of the bourgeois public sphere, identified by Habermas, provides a useful basis for the 'institutional configuration of the contemporary post-bourgeois public sphere and their relevance for the democratic participation of citizens'. The category of the public sphere can help to order these media patterns (alternative, establishment, public, private etc) in terms of the normative notions of citizen access and participation in the political process. It also provides a focused political vision.

Though media theorists have preferred to draw on Habermas' explicit media application, probably the most independent exponent on the revitalisation of the public sphere is Hannah Arendt. A return to Arendt's work (that inspired Habermas and which he critiqued) is very rewarding. It is crucial in explaining the public sphere as the provider of communicative power from the governed to the governors.

Applying Arendt's notion of the public realm to the media provides a way of conceptualising its political role in modern society, outside both the state and the dominant interests in civil society. The fundamental phenomenon of power, she argues, is not the 'instrumentalisation of another's will, but the formation of a common will in a communication directed to reaching agreement' (Habermas, 1986:78). For Arendt power is built up on communicative action; it is a collective effect of speech in which reaching agreement is an end in itself for all those involved. Arendt insists that a public political realm can produce legitimate power only while 'structures of undistorted communication find their expression in it'. 'Power is what keeps the public realm, the potential space of appearance between acting and speaking men, in existence.' (Habermas, 1986:78). And a vital public realm is what distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate power.

She identifies the collapse of the public sphere as a central feature of the modern world and views the crisis of democracy in these terms. This is evident in the trend in representative democracies of advanced societies towards citizen apathy, alienation and anomie. The effect of this is that politics has become less a matter of active citizenship and more a question of rules (Phillips, 1991:16). Without the endorsement of public debate, the decisions by political leaders lack legitimacy.

Inseparably linked to the idea of participation in Arendt's thesis is that of education. These twin concepts are particularly pertinent in considering a democratic role for the media. Arendt's notion of public realm refers to a durable

common world that provides the physical context within which political action can arise. But it also refers to something much more fragile and transitory, 'the space of appearance', which must be continually recreated by action (d'-Entreves, 1989:3-5). This is for her the basis of participation.

As Maurizio d'Entreves points out, for Arendt only the sharing of power that comes from civic engagement and common deliberation can provide each citizen with a sense of effective political agency. Her conception of participatory democracy represents an attempt to reactivate the experience of citizenship and to articulate the conditions for the exercise of effective political agency. For Arendt the reactivation of the public sphere 'depends upon both the recovery of a common, shared world and the creation of numerous spaces of appearance in which individuals can disclose their identities and establish relations of reciprocity and solidarity' (d'Entreves, 1989:2) as equal citizens of a common state.

Democracy, for Arendt, means more than changing structures. It means also schooling citizens in citizenship - the varied skills and values that are essential to sustaining effective participation (d'Entreves, 1989:17). However, Arendt's notion of training citizens does not sufficiently deal with the substantive barriers to equal political participation posed by social inequality. She appears to ignore the social factors that contribute to the success in 'exercising a lasting authority' over others. As LeFort points out, Arendt seems convinced the exchange of words in itself is egalitarian. It cannot transmit any inequality of powers (1988:53). It is precisely with such barriers to democratic participation that radical democratic theorists are concerned.

Ideally for Arendt all those affected by decisions should participate in them. Yet, she argues, it does not matter if the vast majority are excluded as long as it is 'self-exclusion'. A political elite is entirely legitimate and possibly even desirable if it enhances the public sphere. But the notion of self-exclusion or non-participation, a right staunchly defended by those who fear coercive political participation, is highly problematic. There are many cases which may superficially seem like self-exclusion, but on closer examination cannot be understood as such. Feminist Anne Phillips highlights the complexities that underlie it, in terms of the liberal divide between the public and private sphere. She draws on the work of participatory democratic theorist Carole Pateman to argue that 'the exclusion of the domestic from the realm of civil society creates a private individual which is abstracted from familial relations, and it is largely because of this that he can venture forth into the political arena' (Phillips 91:31). For women, Phillips points out, this has two implications. Women are less likely to be able to enter the political sphere because of the additional burden of women's time. The relative importance of the workplace site and the value attached to paid

work, exclude many women. For feminists this failure to explore the nature of the private sphere is a failure in democratic debate (Phillips 1991:29). The separation between the private and public is reconstituted as a sexual division within civil society itself.

Absent from most of the contemporary public spheres then are two fundamental tenets of liberal democracy, those of participation and consent. Women, the poor and blacks, in large numbers do not participate in formal politics or the media, nor can they consent therefore to be ruled. Political equality is inconsistent with social arrangements that deprive many large sectors of society the chance to make decisions, Phillips argues. Formal equalities can combine easily with systematic privilege (1991:38).

This question of structural inequalities as opposed to formal ones is where the challenge lies for media development. Citizens of the new non-racial populace in a future South Africa, will be far from equal in their ability to participate in the public sphere. It is in this regard that Arendt's concern with the educational function and developmental nature of participatory democracy is significant. Other proponents of participatory democracy such as Carole Pateman (1973), drawing on the work of GDH Cole, identify a crucial role for industry in this regard. Philips argues that if the experience of hierarchy and subordination at work undercuts our equal development as citizens, it does so much more in the home (1991:96).

The media in all its forms provides an obvious conduit for democratic participation and education. As I will argue later this requires a formal media policy if it is going to contribute to the reactivation of the public sphere, independent from state or capital domination. The media have already gone some way to revealing the hidden issues of private sphere specifically for women, through popular magazines and programmes. On a more educative and participatory level, television and radio listener clubs of women in Japan, Australia and Zimbabwe have helped counter the isolation of domesticity and sometimes consciously prepared women for participation in industry.[3]

However, as Phillips contends, democratising the corners of the private realm is not the solution to democratising society. For this, the revitalisation of the public realm is essential - '...the greatest crime of liberalism was that it turned the activism of citizenship to the service of private interest or desires and emptied politics of public importance' (1991:16). The solution, she argues like Arendt and Hegel before her, is to re-establish the political as what makes us human and free.

Arendt's overlapping notions of the public sphere, political agency and political culture in her theory of action provide insights into the political functions of media in a democratic polity.

Participatory media could form a crucial part of the public sphere that Arendt argues needs to be reconstituted to 'reactivate' the conditions for active citizenship and democratic self-determination. Alongside, within, and linking other organised groups in civil society (such as the civics, women's groups, greens, trade unions that Dahlgren refers to), public and commercial, community and organisational media provide a feasible way to reconstitute the public sphere in modern industrialised society.

The media can play a crucial role in uniting distinctive individuals to form a political community if they are conceptualised in new forms that are highly accessible to all. In political terms this means that a collective identity under modern conditions can arise out of a constantly negotiated 'process in which actors articulate and defend competing conceptions of cultural and political identity and competing conceptions of political legitimacy' (d'Entreves, 1989:14). This, she argues, is not a result of religious or ethnic affinity, or even some common value system. Rather unity can be achieved by sharing a public space and a set of political institutions. 'What unites people in a political community is therefore not some set of common values, but the world they set up in common, the spaces they inhabit together, the institutions and practices that they share as citizens' (d'Entreves, 1989:8).

Media then by providing public spheres of political participation, could play a crucial role in forming a collective identity. But Arendt makes quite clear this does not require unanimity. 'It is based on the principle of plurality, it does not aim at the recovery or revitalisation of some coherent value scheme, nor at the reintegration of different social spheres' (1989:17).

Finally, to return to the educative role of the media in developing and ensuring a public culture of democratic citizenship. This guarantees everyone the right of opinion and action and nurtures the capacity to articulate and acknowledge the perspectives of others. 'The cultivation of ones moral imagination flourishes in such a culture in which the self-centred perspective of the individual is constantly challenged by the multiplicity and diversity of perspectives that constitute public life' (d'Entreves 1989:18-19).

Towards a Democratic Media Policy

Proponents of the theory of the free market might argue that the media already fulfils this function of the public sphere. By partaking of the morning paper or television news they might argue that citizens step into the only public realm possible in modern society. While this is a first step, the basic democratic requirements of access and participation are not fulfilled. To ensure equity, the same quality and variety of information and debate must be available to all citizens.

Privatisation, conglomeration, deregulation and transnationalisation of the media, argues Colin Sparks, make the realisation of these ideals even less likely. As a result even public service media, increasingly commanded by ommercial imperatives, fail to fulfill their democratic function. 'The modem public sphere seemingly recalls the representativeness of publicness of the middle ages, where elites display themselves for the masses simultaneously using the forum to communicate among themselves' (1992:44).

The accompanying commercialisation and depoliticisation of public information, for Garnham, have eroded the democratic function of the media. The net effect has been the 'the reinforcement of the market and the progressive destruction of public service as the preferred mode for the allocation of cultural resources' and a shift in 'the dominant definition of public information from that of a public good to that of a privately appropriatable commodity' (Garnham, 1986:38, 39).

The basic requirements then of a democratic media system are that it encourages accessibility to public information for all, reflects the diversity of interests in society, assists other political organs of democracy through scrutiny and debate and allows citizens to participate equally in the processes of public policy-making. But 'the media should do more than reflect the prevailing balances of forces in society. It should redress imbalances of power through broadening access to the public domain (by) compensating for inferior resources and skills' (Curran, 1991:30).

To realise some of these ideals within existing political and economic formations, requires a clear media policy. As the outcome of participatory policy-making processes, not only would it display a commitment to democracy, but it could ensure a better flow of public information by modifying market forces and developing independent public media. It should aim to enable the broadest spectrum of views and provide the conditions under which people can have an equal chance of commanding public attention.

Writing on the Latin American experience, Raul Prada (1988:186) warns against the pitfalls of diversity without a guiding public policy. 'The more than thirty new private television channels in Bolivia replaced institutional chaos and government censorship with commercial opportunism, transnational dependence and national irresponsibility'.

Curran (1991:48) identifies four approaches as to how collectivist and market approaches can be synthesised to incorporate the strengths of both. But it is his description of a regulated mixed economy that provides an excellent framework for a media policy appropriate to South Africa. Sparks's discussion of subsidisation following this, offers some basis for practically implementing policy principles.

The first media system, identified by Curran, operates in a centrally-controlled market economy, such as the British television system. Here the rules by which competition can be conducted are centrally determined according to public interest. A drawback is that representation tends to reflect establishment consensus rather than popular dissensus. Secondly, in the Dutch example, which works within a mandated market economy, air time, and publicly owned production facilities with technical staff, are allocated to different groups based on scales relating to membership, plurality and programmes. In the regulated market economy such as in Sweden, the media system has been reformed by lowering barriers to market entry. A Press Subsidies Board tries to reconstitute the competitive market as level playing field such that all participants have an equal prospect of success.

Finally, the media system in a regulated mixed economy could comprise the public, civic and market sectors. There is one major publicly-owned sector committed to public service goals, including the provision of mixed, quality programmes and balanced reporting. The market sector would be subject to minimum controls and established through franchise sales to commercial companies that would also pay an annual spectrum fee. This would fund the civic sector whose role is to extend the ideological range and cultural diversity of the media.

While all these systems create the media as a public sphere in a form that is relatively autonomous from both government and the market, there are no guarantees. As Curran points out, the same interests that dominate the media can also dominate the state. But it does minimise the exercise of state leverage through control of funding and appointments. 'Similarly the processes of the free market do not ensure, as we have seen, that the media mirror the ideological and cultural diversity of the public' (1991:48).

Sparks argues that a central problem for democratic theory arises because of audience segmentation. Newspapers have different balances between public information and other material. Elite media carry far more of the serious information necessary for informed citizenship. Even when the popular press does address the same kind of public information as the quality press, it does so in different ways. These tend to simplify, personalise, dramatise and obscure the public information content (1991:44). The distinction between information and entertainment evident in quality publications becomes blurred in popular publications.

For Sparks there is obviously a need for affordable serious information, but the size of the audience for it is not sufficient to attract mass advertisers and not lucrative enough for luxury advertisers. 'If the market can satisfy the rich's desire for serious public information, and the poor's desire for diversion and entertain-

ment, then the most serious gap that information policy must address is that of the poor who wish to have access to serious public information' (1991:45).

> This implies either subsidising the existing elite press for any losses it sustains as a result of increasing its circulation outside of its advertising-defined target audience, or more likely, subsidising newspapers that can show that they provide the same sorts of material as the quality press but in a form and at a price that makes them attractive to a segment of the non-elite audience'(Sparks, 1991:50).

Sparks argues that a public subsidy has to be considered as a short-term antidote to the anti-democratic tendencies of the market. He also points out that economic precedent for cross subsidies is already there. It is standard business practice to employ cross-subsidies within large-scale diversified media organisations. Both South Africa's English and Afrikaans media provide excellent examples of this. There is extensive cross-ownership of apparently independent and competitive publications by Argus, Times Media Limited, Nationale Pers and Perskor. These major printing and publishing houses are now also the major stakeholders in the 'independent' electronic industry. Besides this they are linked through cartels and cross-cutting ownership to the major financial, industrial and mining houses.

His second defence of a subsidy system is that the structure of advertising revenue is a highly selective subsidy directed at information provision for richer readers.

> These private controlled and directed subsidies are accepted as natural despite the fact they operate entirely outside of the possibility of public control. It is difficult to see why, in principle, a government that is subject to at least some forms of democratic control should be precluded from subsidising information provision for poorer readers' (1992:47-48).

Another useful point of clarity in Sparks's examination of subsidies is the distinction between general and selective subsidies. Debates on media subsidisation have tended to be used very broadly, either to promote or dismiss their application to South Africa. General subsidies (paper subsidies, tax exemptions, etc) tend not to meet the problems of stratified information provision, as they tend to favour large-scale operations. Selective subsidies tend to make small publications open to manipulation. Within this category there are also subsidies for launch and operational funds that are likely to have different outcomes. While these do not alter the basic market economics, they do allow new owners to enter the market (1992:49).

He acknowledges the danger of abuse. 'An information subsidy cannot substitute for a democratic culture, but it can go some way toward sustaining one' (1991:48). He cites the case of Scandinavia to demonstrate that a press may

simultaneously be subsidised and free. 'Just as subsidies do not necessarily mean government intervention in the content of the press, neither does its absence guarantee non-interference', Sparks argues.

Arguments against subsidisation on the grounds of limited resources and more pressing priorities in the South African context, ignore the fundamental role that the media should play in policy formation in relation to those priorities. Housing, health, gender, education policy should not be implemented from the top down, but should arise from the articulated needs and aspirations of those affected by decisions. Media development is not a luxury. It should be viewed alongside other areas of development.

In terms of fiscal logistics media subsidies do not have to draw on the traditional tax sources of the state. The media industry represents an enormous concentration of wealth. The financial basis for a subsidy system could be derived from percentage taxes on advertising or on the profits of media houses. It should also be operated independently of the state, through a representative board. Such a statutory body could represent all media or have distinct broadcast and press bodies. The functions of such a body may extend beyond the allocation of subsidies to include other technical functions such as broadcast spectrum allocation, to the more journalistic aspects of monitoring of media and applying ethical codes. The process of appointment of members of such an independent media authority is highly contentious. Democratic considerations, however, would include the formulation of nomination processes which would extend beyond the elite, the process of US senate-like public hearings whereby the questions of conflict of political or economic interests could be identified. Quotas to ensure gender, regional or racial representativeness or interest sectors within civil society to ensure diversity, could also be explored.

In terms of the actual formula for the allocation of subsidies, a number of effective subsidy systems operate in Holland, Belgium and Sweden. A simple formula involves a set-up subsidy on proof of a certain minimum size constituency and an operating subsidy up to a certain circulation level which suggests economic viability.

The nature of the media in South Africa *is* different to those in advanced countries where the most developed subsidy policies have operated. Media subsidies flourish in countries with long entrenched democratic practices and economic surplus to support them. Certainly the detailed examination of local conditions for any policy initiative is necessary. The commercial media have had and need to continue having a dynamic role in any future media system.[4]

However, the introduction of media subsidisation seems essential to ensuring the entry and operation of interests which would otherwise be excluded. And while elite, centralised state media monopolies need to be avoided, the estab-

lishment of a strong independent public service sector is the only way to ensure the provision of public information for all. Such structures based on public interest and facilitating diversity of opinion are necessary for the revitalisation of democratic public spheres essential for active citizenship.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank Mervyn Frost for his comments on this article and Julie Frederikse for stylistic assistance.
   This paper is part of a dissertation which attempts to theorise a role for the media in the realisation of participatory democracy in South Africa. The philosophical basis of the position adopted here, is the notion that participation is as crucial as representation for democracy to prevail within any polity. Drawing on the work of Carole Pateman and Hannah Arendt, it challenges the Schumpeterian-type conventional wisdom of representation as the central and often exclusive feature of democracy. Although often unacknowledged this position informs both practising politicians and a large portion of modern Western political thought.

2. Curran (1991:48) points out that Habermas' conception of reasoned discourse is ironically closer to the practice of public-service broadcasting in Britain, with its codes of professionalism, objectivity, right of reply, etc, than to the polemicist, rhetorical press of the eighteenth century.

3. Michele Mattelart (1986) in *Women, Media and Crisis, Femininity and Disorder*, describes how the Japanese state broadcasting authority following the Second World War, brought women out of the virtual confinement within the family as part of their policy of modernisation by group listening of educational programmes geared exclusively for women. She notes that by bringing women together, the media played a role analogous to work, until economic development made paid work possible. The duality of this however was evident in the perpetuation of stereotypical

i images of women as obedient and subservient, which reinforced traditional social norms.
   See also Leonard Maveneka, 'Learning and Earing on the Village Airwaves', in *Matlhasedi* (Nov/Dec 1991), in which he decribes the way radio has been used to cut through illiteracy and distance barriers to give rural women, as income generators, a voice.

4. Writing about the Latin American media experience in regimes that have transformed from authoritarianism to democracy, Elizabeth Fox (1988:28) contends that historically, private, commercial and transnational mass media have shown themselves better able, and sometimes willing, to resist censorship and manipulation by the state, than the public service or community orientated programmes. A similar argument could certainly be made for the oppositional role, albeit inconsistent, that the liberal press has played.

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