

THE PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE MEDIA: MARKET SUPREMACY VERSUS DEMOCRACY

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Introduction.

Democratic socialists have the greatest need of a robust, equal-access 'public sphere', in which the collective thinking of society can be carried on and in which state policy can be critically debated by everyone outside the inner circle of party, corporate and state power. It is here that public opinion is formed; and public opinion is, in the last analysis, the only real weapon the democratic left can deploy against the greater economic and social resources of capital. The **left's** need for such a 'public sphere' is especially great now, following the general defeat that has led to, and been consolidated by, the **deregulation** of capital. To recover from this defeat the left has to develop new ideas adapted to the new situation presented by globalised capitalism, and to win popular support for them; and this must ultimately be accomplished in the public sphere.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the public sphere was already far from adequately meeting these requirements. According to Jurgen Habermas, who coined the term in his influential book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, published in 1962, it had been seriously eroded in the course of the nineteenth century; 'with the widening of the franchise, popular education and the spread of mass culture it had become the target of heavy manipulation and commercial advertising and had ceased to be a forum for objective and critical debate. And in the present century, **Habermas** thought, matters had become steadily worse: the 're-feudalisation of society' - the creeping re-absorption of civil society by the state through bureaucratisation, commodification and the 'colonisation of the life world' had all but destroyed the public sphere. 'The main formative conversations of society' (as James **Curran** has called them) no longer really occurred in a setting in which the necessary facts were adequately

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presented and reflected on, and the views and interests of all citizens were accurately **represented**.²

This view was, as **Habermas** later admitted, somewhat overwrought: the eighteenth century public sphere was less perfect, and its twentieth century successor perhaps less imperfect, than his account **allowed**.³ Still, the limitations to which he drew attention were real enough; and since then a drastic further regression has taken place. The media of communication have been far more deeply subordinated to market forces than ever before, and what is communicated through them has been subjected to an altogether new degree of commodification.

This is not just a question of a few 'media moguls' such as Murdoch or Berlusconi using their hugely enhanced market dominance to propagandise for their self-interested far-right views. It is also a matter of public service broadcasting's declining independence and dedication to public service values. In brief summary, the 'public sphere' as a whole has become increasingly market-driven, increasingly restricted to points of view premised on market supremacy, increasingly visual and increasingly passive; whereas the democratic left needs extensive coverage of political issues, critical analysis of them (which primarily visual treatments militate against), and an active not passive stance on the part of the public.

Moreover the restriction of the points of view that are reflected in the mainstream media to those based on market values has been given a further twist by the recent evolution of all West European socialist parties towards acceptance of markets (subject only to 'regulation'). This means that even public service broadcasters can now see themselves as being politically 'impartial' when confining the viewpoints expressed to those that are premised on market values, leading to what *Le Monde Diplomatique* calls 'la **pensée unique**':

When one listens to the media, modernity is almost invariably equated with free trade, strong currencies, deregulation, privatisations.. Outdated notions, on the other hand, are almost invariably associated with the welfare state, government in general (unless it shrivels into a lean law-and-order machine), unions (which are said to defend special interests, unlike those of, say, big business), the nation-state (guilty of fostering nationalism), the people (always likely to be entranced by populism).'

Public service broadcasters face a severe dilemma. The **neoliberals'** aim is to weaken the public service broadcasting sector, by cutting into its audience share with commercial sports and entertainment channels

and thus delegitimising the obligatory licence fee or tax share which provides its revenue; then to reduce its tax income, or licence fee where one exists; and finally to privatise it, or force it to depend on voluntary subscriptions, like American public service broadcasting, and become marginal and irrelevant. Public service broadcasters no longer feel confident that the socialist or social-democratic parties are going to defend them. Will these parties insist that audience share is not to be the measure by which public service broadcasting is judged?

So far the **left** has, on the whole, not sufficiently **grasped** the seriousness of the problem. The aim of this essay is first to suggest why, then to describe in outline the way market forces are commodifying the media and closing down the public sphere, and finally to sketch very briefly the sort of alternative which the left needs to focus on and fight for.

Democracy and the changing media

One of the reasons why the left has been relatively slow to grasp the lethal significance of media commodification may be found in the special circumstances that prevailed in the post-war years, which were formative for so much of subsequent left thinking. These years were not only unique in the social-democratic hegemony that marked them, they were also unique in the combination of media forms that co-existed at that time.

In the era of modern democracy, the 'main formative conversations of society' have been conducted through approximately six successive - **though** sometimes historically overlapping - forms or media of communication: (1) public meetings, supplemented by pamphlets and non-commercial news-sheets - roughly from the origins of modern democracy in the eighteenth century to about 1970; (2) commercial newspapers - the period from about 1880 to the present during which, in Europe but not in north America, ownership was relatively dispersed and the left also had, for a while, its own mass circulation press, but which ended with a right-dominated and largely unregulated commercial press oligopoly; (3) public service broadcasting (first radio and then television) - from about 1920 onwards (supplemented by public service-regulated commercial broadcasting); (4) **lightly**-regulated or unregulated commercial radio and television broadcasting - from about 1980 onwards in Europe, but much earlier in the USA; and (5) 'multi-media' (i.e. increasingly integrated systems combining text, speech, sound, and still and moving images), largely controlled by

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a handful of transnational mega-firms - whose dominance is just beginning.

Of course the dominant media forms and combinations of forms have varied between countries, although all countries have experienced the dominant influence of meetings, and all are about to experience - or do already - the dominance of the multi-media oligopolies. In the period from about 1950 to 1980, however, there was a unique overlap of media forms: face-to-face meetings, a still partially pluralistic press, and vigorous public service broadcasting. Although there were problems with press concentration, and numerous shortcomings in the various national public service broadcasting systems, the combination of these three media systems provided the means for a collective discourse that was perhaps uniquely effective in the history of large-scale democracies.

Public service broadcasting commanded very wide audiences, with some programming - including newscasts and political discussions - that attracted mass viewing across all the social divides. This was perhaps especially true in Britain. A competing commercial TV sector was introduced there relatively early (in 1955) but under strong 'public service' regulation. Faced with this competition - but not with unfettered commercial competition - the BBC, which had already achieved a 'savvy mixing of low and high forms', found itself able to hold its own.³ The result was a televised public discourse across the two sectors that was broadly shared by the whole population, and against which the notoriously partisan and untrustworthy 'infotainment' tabloids, and the often scarcely less partisan 'quality' press, were judged (in Britain nearly 80 per cent of people still think television news readers tell the truth, compared with only 10 who trust print journalists). In addition, people still attended public meetings where politicians were seen in the flesh and were expected to answer awkward questions, and whose proceedings were fairly fully reported in the press; and at this period many people still attended various other political meetings - of trade unions or party branches or pressure groups of all kinds - where the discourses of the mass media and the public performances of politicians were reviewed and criticised.

This era can easily be **romanticised**, but one indication that it was real enough is the way many people, including many on the left, have been slow to recognise the seriousness of its accelerating erosion now; there is still a strong tendency to think that the problems of the media will be solved as a result of a collective debate for which, in reality, the current media regime provides less and less room.

Yet the problem for socialism is obviously particularly serious; the formation of a new hegemonic project means the development of a persuasive critique of the dominant ideology and discourses, and persuasive visions and models of alternative social arrangements, which can be criticised, modified, and ultimately accepted by a majority in the 'collective dialogue of society'. This, however, cannot take place without access to the 'commanding heights of the media system', not least because meetings of all kinds have largely **disappeared**.⁶ Their disappearance is **partly** due to the greater potency - greater reach, greater visual impact, and greater control - offered by radio and television, which has led politicians to prefer them to meetings; but it is also, and more fundamentally and lastingly, due to the fact that the mass media, and especially television, have radically altered the way we get political information and knowledge, and indeed our whole way of life, in terms both of the time the media absorb (the average Briton watches television for three hours a day, the average American for much more), and the outlook they normalise: '...we go out less purposefully, and are willing, and indeed may feel we have to, spend more on what we do at home. People will pay a lot of money on entertainment technology that removes the need for them to leave their houses.' The mass media culture has thus contributed significantly to the disappearance of meetings, while not itself constituting a substitute for the shared, engaged and interactive discourse that meetings made possible.

The commodification of the media

That the media should have been allowed to become primarily institutions at the service of capital accumulation and not at the service of democracy is, from a democratic perspective, an arresting fact, and one that we should pause over; something essential to democracy has been, in effect, given away. How did this happen? A general, obviously oversimplified, answer runs as follows. In the liberal reaction against autocracy, freedom from state control of thought and expression was seen as having to include freedom of publication; and a 'free press' - meaning freedom to print and distribute political pamphlets and 'news papers' - was a crucial part of this. But once industrialised production made it possible to make newspapers **profitable**, by aiming them at larger readerships and financing them out of **advertising** revenue, the 'freedom to publish' radically altered its **meaning**. It became freedom to make money and to exercise the political influence that successful commercial **publishing** afforded. As competition reduced the number

and diversity of newspapers, anti-monopoly legislation was introduced; but even if this had been more effective than it was, focussing on the issue of how many owners there were has often tended to obscure the fact that market competition ultimately obliges all owners of mass-circulation papers to run them as businesses, not as a service to democracy. Survival depends on **profitability**, **profitability** depends on advertising, advertising depends on readership maximisation, and readership maximisation depends on entertainment - not political debate.

Moreover with the advent of **globalisation** and the dominance of discourses of 'national competitiveness', even the liberal discourse that underpinned anti-monopoly legislation has been progressively abandoned. The political arguments for media pluralism are increasingly brushed aside by purely economic arguments in favour of allowing some media companies to become national or regional 'champions', big enough to survive in global competition. The principle appears to be that it is better to be dominated by one or two domestic giants than one or two foreign-based ones; the requirements of national democracy are simply ignored. In the British case the ideological character of this argument is aggravated by the fact that Rupert Murdoch's News International, the leading candidate to be Britain's 'champion' (controlling half of Britain's land-based digital TV, all its satellite TV, a **large** part of its land-based analogue commercial TV and a third of national press circulation), is an American-owned, Australian-based company, which pays virtually no tax in Britain.'

Simultaneously with the abandonment of the principle of political pluralism in national media the original arguments for establishing broadcasting as a public service have also disappeared. It was initially agreed that a democracy could not allow private interests to exercise the power afforded by radio and television when only a few wavelengths or channels existed; there was also the argument, particularly strongly made in Britain, that these potent new media should be used to educate the new mass electorate. But frequency scarcity has been replaced by frequency abundance, thanks to the digital revolution and other technological changes; and the idea of a so-called 'mandarin' elite using the airwaves to educate 'the masses' has also become unacceptable. As a result, public service broadcasting is being increasingly displaced by the commercial sector, partly by competition (see below) and partly by ideological erosion - the commercial sector attacks the whole idea of non-market public service. Rupert Murdoch, with characteristically populist arrogance, seeks to subvert the whole

public service discourse by declaring that 'anybody who, within the law of the land, provides a service which the public wants at a price it can afford is providing a public **service**'.⁹

The speed with which global market forces are currently eroding the autonomy and quality of public service broadcasting, and driving what is left of it to mimic market-driven values, varies **significantly** from country to country; but the process is unmistakably at work everywhere and constitutes an increasingly serious obstacle to the construction of a new progressive project.

The logic of commodified media

It is first of all necessary to note the scale and the scope of the media industry. It consists of a set of interlocking markets, marked by constant technological change and political competition, and including: media hardware (from satellites and computers to walkmans) and software (for multimedia production and transmission, and for education and training) – in effect, the entire information technology market; print publication (newspapers, magazines); radio broadcasting; television production and broadcasting; film and video production and distribution; music performances and recording sales; advertising; and public relations. Thanks to the speed of technological change, which is fast eroding the boundaries between all these formerly separate sectors, no **useful figures** for the total weight of all these sectors in the economy currently exist; in Britain they certainly account for not less than **500,000** jobs – twice the number employed in the automobile industry – and are **fast-growing**.¹⁰ In 1997 there were already some **250** television channels in Europe; the number was due at least to double by the end of the millennium.

The digital revolution also means that the media are increasingly integrated: music, sound, images, film, text and numerical data can all be received on a home computer; books and newspapers go onto CD-ROMs. This drives media companies to seek vertical and horizontal integration so as to maximize profits from the multiple upstream and downstream forms of exploitation that a product may lend itself to, and to protect themselves from the **risk of technological** obsolescence. Film studios seek to own video store chains, computer companies seek to own film libraries, **etc.**¹¹ As a result, a few increasingly transnational megafirms predominate: Time-Warner-Turner, Sony, Disney-ABC, Bertelsmann, **Axel-Springer-Kirch**, Fininvest and News Corporation. Some analysts even speculate that the time is not distant when, thanks

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to digitalisation, just one of these firms, News Corporation, will confront yet another, Bill Gates's software giant Microsoft, in a contest for ultimate control of the entire global media **system**.¹²

Some of these big companies use the media they control for direct political propaganda; this is notoriously true of the British press, and has been a factor keeping attention – especially the attention of the country's competing political elites, always preoccupied with the next election - focussed on the issue of monopoly. This was well illustrated by the British Conservative Party's anguish at the start of the General Election campaign in March 1997, when Rupert Murdoch instructed the editor of the Sun (with a circulation of nearly four million, and perhaps ten million readers) to switch the paper's support to the Labour Party; and the power of press barons has been the cause of successive attempts by the left in the British Labour Party to introduce legal barriers to the concentration of newspaper ownership. Significantly, the risk that any such effort would provoke a deadly partisan onslaught from the press owners in the name of 'press freedom' has always led the Labour leadership to quash such initiatives."

But while this is manifestly undemocratic it is not necessarily the most serious problem. Although the tabloid press has political influence, it is not able to offset major shifts in opinion occurring in response to objective changes in people's everyday lives. In spite of the Sun's hostility to Labour before March 1997, surveys showed that the proportion of its readers who supported the Conservatives had steadily fallen, from 45 per cent in 1992 to 25 per cent at the end of 1996;¹⁴ so that in making its switch the Sun was simply trying not to lose its readers by coming round to the opinion that most of them had independently arrived at (it was also a response to the fact that since 1994, under Tony Blair's leadership, the Labour Party had moved so much closer to Murdoch's views, as the Sun's editor condescendingly pointed out). From a democratic point of view the most fundamental problem is, in fact, precisely that the market sector, however many competitors there are, is indeed ultimately driven by its own logic always to put commercial criteria before all others in shaping media content; the aim is to maximize **circulation** for advertisers, and minimise costs, and this progressively diminishes the democratic process by reducing the vitality and scope of the public sphere.

Maximising circulation or audiences makes entertainment a priority. This extends both to the balance of content, and to the way content is placed or sequenced. In the US, the editorial and reporting costs of

even major newspapers account for less than 20 per cent of the total. Advertising averages 75 per cent of total revenue and advertisements typically constitute about 70 per cent of total content, while entertainment accounts for most of the rest. In the case of provincial newspapers in Britain, where rationalisation on purely business principles has probably gone farthest, the share of editorial costs in provincial newspapers fell from 27 per cent in 1947 to 15 per cent in 1975. In the case of radio and TV, the need to hold audiences for advertisers means that any public affairs programmes that licensed broadcasters are obliged to broadcast tend to be placed in unpopular time slots and made as entertaining and **undemanding** as possible. In the USA, where regulation of commercial broadcasting is lightest, serious news and public affairs programmes, as opposed to the inexpensive coverage of human-interest court cases or disasters, have become rare.

Profit-driven cost-cutting reinforces all these tendencies. In newspapers it means that the decline in the ratios of editorial and reporting to advertising content involves severe cuts in editorial and reporting staff; in the ten years 1982-1992 the median editorial (*i.e.* journalist) staff on US dailies fell by almost a quarter and on weeklies, by over a third. In the 1980s, the editorial share fell much faster, accelerated by mergers and the use of the new technology. In one example four newspapers employing a total of 25 journalists were merged into one freesheet employing one **reporter**.¹⁵ Journalists' pay has also fallen steadily, senior and experienced staff being replaced by young reporters on less than half national average wages. In Britain, the total editorial staffing of all papers is estimated to have fallen by at least 40 per cent between 1977 and 1993, while the total number of pages per issue increased by 72 per cent."

Similar tendencies have been at work in broadcasting. Even so-called **flagship** programmes like BBC 2's *Newsnight* have cut and casualised staff and replaced senior reporters with cheap junior **ones**.¹⁷ 'Tabloid' TV is on its way, to match the tabloid press. And as staff resources are cut, the uncritical use of news material supplied by outside sources increases, surrendering both the provision and the interpretation of news to government, party and corporate spin-doctors, whose use by all those who can afford them has steeply **increased**.¹⁸ Globalisation, moreover, makes it easier to buy cheaper US-produced news services such as CNN with its US-determined agenda, or Sky News with its populist rejection of any overt 'mission to explain'; the ideal of the 'collective conversation' of a national society is increasingly displaced

by that of a multiplicity of individuals passively viewing the world through the eyes of global business.

Two general features of market-driven media should also be noted: the drive to entertain, and the drive to widen audiences. Market research dictates the themes and treatments chosen to attract the readerships and audiences that, in effect, are being constructed for sale to advertisers." This dictates the familiar 'dumbing down' tendency – reducing the intellectual demands made on the reader, listener or viewer, by ruthless simplification, and a heavy reliance on 'human interest' stories, the cult of celebrity – and emotional appeal – anxiety, shock and sex; and once habituated to this, audiences are seen as being resistant to anything else. A further twist has been provided by the development of a global market for feature programmes; producers are under increasing pressure to make programmes with international sales appeal. On this calculus what is specifically national, especially what is specifically political, in feature programmes, must be reduced, if not eliminated. The subordination of the public sphere to the market is here made explicit.

The impending digital revolution, in which a superabundance of new commercial channels will shortly be offered, promises a sharp acceleration of these processes. Audience fragmentation is inevitable, and in the anxiety this is creating among prospective new broadcasters they are all turning to the only two reliable audience-attractors – films and sport (in both of which, incidentally, Murdoch's News Corporation already has a very **large** if not dominant stake).

The political implications were illustrated rather dramatically by the party election broadcasts in the 1997 election in Britain, in which talks by party leaders were largely replaced by political soap operas or cartoons. A very similar effect, perhaps even more fatal to intelligent 'collective dialogue', is the declining length of 'soundbites' in political interviews (which are said to have fallen to an average of 7-8 seconds for the candidates in the last US Presidential election). In **general**, the end result can be seen in the US model of barely regulated television. Nicholas Fraser, a BBC editor, sums it up as a 'willingness to concede that "quality" is for rich people and trash is for the masses. This is an American attitude but it is becoming evident too in Europe... In the US, traditional broadcasting is known as "free TV". "Look, I wouldn't watch it," a mogul said to me, about his network's output. "Of course free TV is terrible - it's for poor people, not you and me".'²⁰ National political discussion clearly cannot be conducted in media conceived in these terms.

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Some other politically **significant** effects of market-driven media also deserve to be noted. One is the one-directional nature of the communication; the **reader/listener/viewer** is passive and remote. Where a live audience is involved, spin-doctors do their best to ensure that awkward questions will not be asked. Even where politicians talk to professional interviewers on television, the agenda is at best set by the idea of 'impartiality' laid down in public service regulations, **i.e.** a 'balance' between the positions of the leaders of the major political parties, with other perspectives rarely represented.

Another problem is that television, which most people consider the most reliable source of news, famously works by means of the selection of images which often have little relation to the picture a balanced and critical analysis would **produce**;²¹ moreover it can't be checked by re-reading what has just been said. Television also rarely **provides** any **significant** historical context. It might be argued, in fact, that its contribution to the deletion of historical context is one of television's most serious injuries to democracy. While public service broadcasting in Britain, at least, still produces excellent historical programmes, these tend to attract minority audiences; whereas the 'infotainment'-influenced format of even public service mass-audience news programmes tends to de-historicise all **events**.²² By the time the introductory human-interest story has been told, there is little time to do more than 'position' the subsequent two minutes' worth of information with the aid of interpretive labels ('rebel', 'loyalist', 'Arab', 'hard-line' and the rest), which give the impression of history having been taken into account, while actually excluding it. A great deal depends, too, on the size and quality of the research teams employed. As these decline through cost-cutting, the historical sophistication of the programmes - the questions asked, the context provided - declines too.

A final political effect worth emphasising is the tendency of market-driven media to kill off intra-party debate. With the multiplication of radio stations and TV channels carrying news (including 24-hours news channels) competition drives producers to treat differences of opinion within parties, especially differences between senior party **figures**, as 'splits', with potentially negative electoral consequences. This drives parties to try to limit public **policy** discussion. In **1997** the British Labour Party made radical changes to its constitution so that annual conferences would in **future** avoid having controversial debates and so offer a target to the media; open debates by elected representatives of the membership were replaced by private discussions in 'policy forums' selected, not elected, from various parts of the party **structure**.²³

Some objections

Against this general picture of market-driven media eroding and displacing the collective debate necessary for democracy (let alone democratic socialism), three arguments are advanced that need to be briefly considered here.

First, it is argued with some justification that commercial broadcasting has had beneficial effects in **forcing** much-needed improvements in state-controlled 'public **service**' broadcasting - breaking the monopoly of party **and/or** state bureaucrats over the news, forcing elite-dominated broadcasting organisations to cater to popular wishes, ending the reign of propaganda, didacticism and dullness. The force of this argument is undeniable, but it is not, on the other hand, an argument for allowing unregulated commercial broadcasting to undermine and **eventually** destroy **public** service broadcasting, and with it, the very existence of the public sphere on which democracy depends.

A second argument is based on technological change: the threat of unregulated commercial broadcasting is said to be exaggerated because channel superabundance may actually lead to a decline in overall viewing, and a lessening of its importance. In Britain, there was a drop of almost ten per cent in viewing time between 1985 and 1995, and the impending proliferation of channels through digitalisation could conceivably lead to a further fall. Polls indicate that people do not welcome it and many commentators think there could be widespread indifference. The trouble with this argument is that a decline in viewing does not entail an increase in some other form of collective discussion, and it is not obvious that any other is **likely**.²⁴

The third argument, also based on technology, is that interactive TV, the internet, and multimedia will re-establish democratic debate by linking each citizen to every other. It seems unwise to count on this, having seen how the much-heralded democratisation of the press that was supposed to occur in the 1980s (through the lowering of production costs by the advent of computerised editing and typesetting) was successfully thwarted by the established publishers using their market power to raise the costs of entry to newcomers; it is worth noting that in Britain in 1997 the total number of internet subscribers was about one per cent of the electorate. And we can be sure that the much-hyped 'interactive' TV, when it comes, will really be 'responsive' TV, with viewers responding to agendas set by commercial interests, not TV meeting the needs of democracy. In

general, **technological change** that is driven by the search for profits will not, by its nature, come to rest in a low-cost universally accessible system. The establishment of such a system - supposing it were judged desirable - would require a politically-determined decision, and public expenditure to make it genuinely universal.

The impact on public service broadcasting

The erosion of democracy that is occurring through the marketisation of the media has been significantly obscured by the existence of the 'public service' sector in broadcasting. In Britain at least, the left has tended to take comfort from the existence of this sector, even when it too has been hostile to the **left** (as for instance in the television treatment of industrial conflict in the 1970s, or the 'Bennite' left in the 1980s), **feeling** that over time it must respond to 'public opinion'. This view rests on a conception of public opinion being formed somewhere else - in some more primary or basic collective conversation that continues to take place independently of the media, if not in public or trade union meetings, then in homes and pubs. This view is not entirely mistaken. There is an ongoing process of grass-roots discussion, related to people's everyday experience; but it is easy to underestimate the extent to which the agenda and interpretations of the media set the agenda of this conversation too, and shape the way **personal** experience is interpreted. It also tends to overlook the extent to which public sector broadcasting is now itself **being** reshaped by the pressures of market forces.

As Curran has pointed out, different forms of public service broadcasting have different weaknesses in relation to market pressures, to which first international radio and now satellite TV broadcasting has increasingly exposed them all, regardless of national state **policy**.²⁵ State-controlled services tend to be boring and are usually distrusted, and hence succumb both to more entertaining commercial competition (the earlier success of radio stations like Radio Luxembourg is a case in point), and to political pressures to remove their protected status and even privatise them (as with France's **TF1** television channel). Public service broadcasting parcelled out among political parties or religious or linguistic communities has stronger political defences but tends to ossify debate, and make broadcasting predictable and boring by giving fixed party or religious interests a sort of oligopoly - which itself is likely to prove vulnerable to market compe-

tion, as in the case of the satellite commercial channel **RTL4's** dramatic sweep of viewers in the Netherlands.

The quasi-corporatist or civil service model adopted in Britain avoids these weaknesses, but has its own limitations. In particular it suffers from being governed by unrepresentative, politically-appointed boards; the mandate to be politically impartial is, as already noted, interpreted as requiring it to be impartial only between the positions of the main parliamentary parties; 'diversity' of content is interpreted to mean diversity of cultural interests, not of ideological viewpoints; and universality of access is understood to mean that everyone should be able to receive broadcasts, not to have input into their content. These limitations are reinforced by broadcasters' tendency to restrict their sources of news and opinion to 'a small repertory of the powerful, authoritative and accredited', whose elite point of view the broadcasters themselves then tend to **reflect**.²⁶ (For example, the political editor of the *Independent* newspaper, Andrew Rawnsley, commenting on the 1996 party conferences on BBC Radio remarked that Labour had 'had its most successful conference for years, with the leadership in complete control'; no one on the programme questioned the elite standpoint implied in this.)

On the other hand the public service sector in Britain has notable strengths, and has to some extent withstood neoliberal political pressures. This has been due partly to a lingering attachment to mandarin values within the Conservative Party's leadership; partly to anxiety in the commercial sector about whether, if the BBC were obliged to depend on advertising revenue, it would capture so much of the available advertising spend (running at about £2.6 billion in 1997) that some of the commercial companies would go to the wall; and perhaps most importantly to the fact that the public service system was very popular, thanks to its professionally-driven excellence and its successful 'early compromise between elite and market **values**'.²⁷ As a result, the privatisers' attack in the 1980s was limited. The BBC was left with its licence fee revenue, but obliged to cut costs by **casualising** and reducing staff, outsourcing more of its production to the private sector, and subjecting all programming to more business-oriented, management-inspired criteria through the creation of an internal 'quasi-market'.

But what this story also shows is that even the most popular public-service system is only relatively robust in face of market pressures, which feed into its thinking and **performance** as the effects of anticipated competition, and the fear of being reduced or even abolished

outright by a more hostile **neoliberal** government later. In the case of the BBC, the issue has become defined as one of whether its share of total viewing is sufficient to make it possible to go on requiring all **TV** owners to pay the BBC licence fee, which is in effect a hypothecated tax. New commercial channels are bound to draw away viewers from all existing channels, including the BBC's, and at some point the neoliberals will argue for **making** the licence fee voluntary or shifting to pay-per-view, as advocated by the Economist, or privatising it, as advocated by the Institute for Economic Affairs.²⁸ competition from global commercial and pay-per-view TV, especially from Murdoch's three satellite companies (Sky in Europe, Fox in north America, and Star in Asia), has also dramatically altered the economics of sport and sports broadcasting rights, pricing the live broadcasting of more and more non-'ring-fenced' sports out of the reach of public service sector broadcasting, and pulling audiences with **them**.²⁹ The BBC has had to counter with more **popular** programming, while at the same time spreading its licence revenue ever more thinly to enter digital broadcasting and 24-hour newscasting, trying to economise by cutting **staff**, sharing resources between services, going 'bimedia' (i.e. making radio and television services share facilities) and expanding overseas sales." In early 1998 a new schedule for Radio 4, the BBC's main national talk programme, included, among other things, shifting coverage of Parliament to less popular wavelengths and times. There could be no serious doubt that these measures eroded the **fulfilment** of the **BBC's** public service mandate.

In face of competition from satellite and cable the BBC shows signs of retaining its viewer share more successfully than ITV; and the inroads of the new subscription channels have been quite limited, **though** how long this will last as more channels are offered, and how far **it** is at the cost of reduced quality in the public service sector, remains to be seen." The Channel **3** commercial TV companies, vigorously supported by the advertising industry, have **predictably** reacted to the new competition by lobbying to reduce the public service obligations laid on **them**.³⁰ The spiral continues, with the end already known, in outline, from North America.

Reclaiming the media for *democracy*

For a renewed collective debate about the **fundamental** principles of social organisation to be possible, and for a renewed socialist project to be articulated and get a hearing, a new media order is needed. The

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most comprehensive scheme is perhaps the one proposed by James Curran which envisages four distinct publicly-funded (or subsidised) sectors, alongside a purely market sector (like the barely-regulated satellite and cable broadcasting companies in Britain today), each one catering for a different facet of a modern, technically complex and diverse 'public sphere': a public service sector, a 'social' market sector, a professional sector and a 'civic' sector.³³

The *public service sector* would be adequately funded from public sources and have a mandate to represent widely differing socio-economic interests and perspectives as well as cultural ones. It would be controlled by directors chosen by and publicly answerable to a broadly representative council;³⁴ but it would still be required to justify its funding by, among other things, maintaining a significant audience share - in other words, it should compete effectively for public attention and support, but on the basis of quality, not advertiser-driven, audience-maximising programmes.

This sector would be supplemented, second, by a '*social market*' sector. This would be advertising-funded broadcasting and publishing but subject to public-service regulation. The aim would be to combat the tendency to oligopoly and uniformity of the pure market sector, but not only (as with ITV in Britain today) by regulations to limit monopoly and cross-media ownership and to make it serve the public interest in various ways, but also by providing official assistance of various kinds which would be given to social forces that would otherwise be under-represented in the market sector, on the lines of the support currently given to minority publications in Sweden and Norway, or (through a different formula) to Channel 4 TV in Britain.

Third, a *professional sector* would serve the traditional conception of a 'fifth estate', providing fiction and drama programmes as well as public affairs, financed from an advertising tax but controlled and run by professional journalists and governed by professional journalistic values.

Finally a '*civic*' sector would consist of state-assisted channels, stations and publications controlled by popular bodies, from parties to minority organisations and community groups, catering primarily to the internal communication needs of these various sub-communities though also facilitating the contributions they can ultimately make to the wider national discourse.

Other elements of a democratised media system not included in Curran's model, but which should also, ideally, be generalised, include a constitutional right of reply to statements in the media that are

misleading and tendentious; other public service obligations of various kinds laid on high-circulation newspapers, such as the obligation to carry party political statements in the same way that the regulated broadcast media are obliged to carry party political broadcasts, as proposed by Martin **Linton MP**, or the requirement to devote specified proportions of space to certain categories of 'public service' content, as **proposed by Jean Seaton**;³⁵ and laws protecting editorial and journalistic independence from owners and advertisers, rejecting the idea of absolute property rights over any medium of communication, and establishing a degree of internal democracy within press and broadcasting organisations.

Priorities for the left

This concluding section is necessarily very tentative, and is offered purely as a possible contribution to agenda-making.

In the first place, it probably needs to be recognised that while the media have played a crucial role in the marginalisation and ghettoisation of progressive ideas and perspectives, this could not have been so **successful** had these ideas and perspectives been inherently more convincing. The first necessity is for serious intellectual effort to evolve a coherent and believable new vision of a non-market society.

At the same time, even working out such a vision - as the European labour movement did over roughly a hundred years from **1850 to 1950** - itself depends on the media, and initially, especially, on a strong 'civic' sector (in the sense outlined in the previous section). In countries where this sector is poorly endowed, and where the governing parties are **unlikely to help** it, the labour movement seems the likeliest source of support. In Britain, where the Labour Party leadership have been frankly distancing themselves from the trade unions and 'repositioning' the party as a 'party of business', the unions need to think in terms of directing some financial support to the progressive media sector, perhaps beginning with a few magazines and 'talk' radio stations, where the set-up and running costs are relatively modest. At the same time, the lesson of so many failed left publishing (and broadcasting?) projects needs learning, that progressive media initiatives are a waste of money and energy unless they can compete on quality - **i.e.**, in concept, form, content, and **technique**.³⁶

Yet advocacy of a comprehensive media regime is also important. The ideals of democracy remain potent and can be attached to the demand for a democratic media regime. Potential support for it exists,

as is shown by the European Parliament's narrowly-defeated effort to strengthen the TWF Directive in 1997." What is needed is to concretise a vision of a functioning public sphere that will empower people concerned with the risks in their environment, the power of large corporations, the secrecy of officials and quangos, and so on, by making the media a real 'fourth estate' and a field open to individuals, groups and movements to speak and act in. From the outset, advocacy must articulate discourse on the media to the discourse of democracy, and disarticulate it from the discourses of industry and the market - speaking of deliberative democracy, not 'information policy', of recovering the airwaves from big business and restoring them to the constitution, and so on. There is scope for discursive initiative here.

The idea of a media regime in the service of democracy also has the merit of consisting, essentially, of a shelf-full of eminently practical measures, many of which already exist in some country or other (and which cannot therefore be dismissed as unrealistic), and almost all of which, as with freedom of information, have broad liberal appeal. Concentrating initially on campaigns to secure these would be educative in itself, and success would tend to make the achievement of other measures less difficult.

NOTES

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- 1 *Strukturwandel k r Öffentlichkeit*, published in English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: Polity, 1989.
- 2 The expression quoted is from James Curran, 'Media Soundings', *Soundings*, No. 5 1997, p. 132.
- 3 For a lucid summary and general critique of Habermas' thesis see Craig Calhoun, 'Introduction', in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, Mass and London, England: The MIT Press, 1992, pp. 1-48; Habermas' response is on pp. 421-61. Nicholas Garnham's essay in the same volume ('The Media and the Public Sphere') also deserves attention.,
- 4 Serge Halimi, 'When market journalism invades the world', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 1997 (English translation from <http://www.monde-diplomatique.fr>, courtesy of Alan Zuege).
- 5 Nicholas Fraser, 'A New Moronism', *Guardian* 2 June 1997. By 1996 BBC 1 and 2 together still had 43.6 per cent of total audience, Channel 3 (Independent TV) and Channel 4 combined had 47.3 per cent, and satellite and cable channels 9.1 per cent.

- 6 The phrase quoted is from James **Curran**, 'Media Soundings', in *Soundings* No. 5, 1997, p. 132. It is true that some of the **functions** formerly performed by meetings are now **performed** by conferences and workshops, but participation in these is generally limited to members of organisations who can afford the fees, which are often prohibitive; it seems undeniable that the participation of most people in any kind of political meetings – if not any kind of meetings at all – has drastically declined. This is not to say that people no longer discuss public affairs at all, as noted below; but there is an important distinction to be drawn between casual interpersonal exchanges and planned, more or less ordered and informed discussions, aimed at arriving at shared conclusions, or at least clarifying differences.
- 7 Jean **Seaton**, 'Sovereignty and the media', paper presented to The Sovereignty Seminar, Birkbeck **College**, 1997, p. 2.
- 8 T. **Lennon**, 'Wily **Rupert** is a safe bet', *Free Press*, March-April 1997; leading article, *Guardian*, 17 July 1996.
- 9 Murdoch, R., *Freedom in Publishing*, James **McTaggart** Memorial Lecture, London: News Corporation Ltd., 1989, p. 4.
- 10 The Policy Studies Institute has calculated the total employment of the 'cultural industry' at over 500,000 in 1994 (*Cultural Trends* No. 25). If we subtract employment in things like live concerts, libraries and museums that are included in this total, but then add employment in advertising and telecommunications and the production of telecommunications equipment, data processing equipment and other IT equipment, which it does not include, we seem bound to arrive at a still larger figure.
- 11 V. Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication*, London: Sage, 1996, p. 145.
- 12 M. Tran (*Guardian* 22 May 1997) quotes the editor of *New Media Age* as saying: 'Gates wants to control cyberspace... He wants to be a big media player. He's scrambling for a way of taking MSN [**Microsoft's** online service] content to the TV. **He's** already bought up hosts of picture libraries and intellectual property... The future will see not Gates versus Larry Ellison [chairman of database software developer, Oracle]. It will be Gates vs Murdoch'.
- 13 The last general initiative of this kind was the Labour backbencher Chris **Mullin's** 1995 Media (Diversity) Bill, which would have made it illegal to own more than one national newspaper (and illegal for foreigners, like Murdoch and Conrad Black, who owns the *Telegraph*, to own more than 20 per cent of one). It would also have prevented any newspaper owner from having more than a twenty percent share in any television company. In 1998 a House of Lords cross-party amendment to the Blair **government's** Competition Bill sought to prohibit 'predatory pricing', which was being practised by Murdoch's *Times* and threatened the demise of at least one major national daily. The amendment, which had widespread support within the party, was also vetoed by the Labour leadership.
- 14 *The Free Press*, London: Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom, 1997.
- 15 T.D. Humphrey, 'Britain's Provincial **Press's**', **unpublished** paper, Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmith's College, University of London, 1997.
- 16 A. Davies, "'The Management of Reputation": Public Relations and Its Influence on New Production in the British National **Press's**', unpublished paper, Political Economy Study Group, Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmith's College, 1996. The figures for numbers of pages are for eight national newspapers. In mid-1997 it was reported that the chief executive of the Mirror Group of

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newspapers, David Montgomery, was planning to have all the papers in the group, which included both the tabloid *Mirror* and the up-market 'quality' broadsheet *Independent*, share reporters; there would be just one reporter per story, the 'editorial integrity' of each paper being supplied by its editors re-working the story (Roy Greenslade, 'Hack of All Trades', *Guardian* 23 June 1997).

- 17 In June 1998 the radio and television technicians' union BECTU closed down most of the BBC's live national programmes for 24 hours in a fight over the corporation's plans to move them into a new subsidiary company and make them all become 'multi-skilled', which the union saw as incipient privatisation.
- 18 In Britain by the end of the 1980s the government had become the biggest advertiser and employed 800 staff in the Central Office of Information and 700 press and information officers in fourteen departments, at a total cost of about £240 million p.a. (P. Golding, 'Political Communication and Citizenship: The Media and Democracy in an Inegalitarian Social Order', in M. Ferguson, (ed.), 1990, *Public Communication: The New Imperatives*, London: Sage, 1990, p. 95). Davies (op. cit.) summarises the rather scattered data on the rise of the rest of the 'public relations' industry in Britain, citing estimates of annual growth rates in the 1980s of 25-30 per cent. In 1991 Government accounted for about 15 per cent of the total PR workforce, companies for 28 per cent, consultancies for 53 per cent and non-profit organisations for five per cent.
- 19 D. Smythe, 'Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* Vol. I, 1977, pp. 1-27.
- 20 Fraser, op. cit.
- 21 According to Diane Mather, *Surviving the Media: How to Appear Successfully on TV, Radio or in the Press*, London: Thorsens, 1995, research shows that viewer reaction to a speaker is determined 58 per cent by appearance, 35 per cent by voice and only seven per cent by content.
- 22 On the way competition from the commercial sector affects public service news presentation see B. Pfetsch, 'Convergence Through Privatisation? Changing Media Environments and Televised Politics in Germany', *European Journal of Communication* 11/4, pp. 427-451.
- 23 '...when Labour is in government... the more controversial or significant the debates and other events at Party Conference, the more they attract sensational press attention. Gladiatorial contests and deeply divisive conflicts particularly capture attention, irrespective of their true significance; and the alleged power and influence of key individuals, unions or groups are emphasised... As far as possible, and without detracting from the democratic decision-making powers of the Conference, we need to beware of providing opportunities for external opponents and critics of the Party to pinpoint Conference as an example of difficulties for the Party in power' (Labour Party, *Labour Into Power: a framework for partnership*, 1997, p. 14). See also L. Panitch and C. Leys, *The End of Parliamentary Socialism: From New Left to New Labour*, London: Verso, 1997, Chapter 11.
- 24 An alternative argument, based on the British experience in particular, is that public service broadcasting, adequately funded from taxation, or funded by advertising but tightly regulated (and preferably both, to make each compete on quality), may manage to retain mass audiences, while the unregulated commercial sector fragments into dozens of minority-audience channels of all kinds. This, however, depends on a secure and sophisticated public service sector, which is currently under threat.

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- 25 James **Curran**, 'Media and Democracy; The Third Route', in Michael Bruun Andersen (ed.), *Media and Democracy*, Oslo: University of Oslo Press, 1996; also **Curran**, 'Welfare vs Free Market', op. cit.
- 26 James **Curran**, 'Reform of Public Service Broadcasting', *The Public*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1996, p. 14.
- 27 **Curran**, *ibid.*, p. 11.
- 28 *The Economist*, 15 March 1997; M.E. **Beesley** et al., *Markets and the Media*, London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1996, pp. 100-07. The privatising option assumes that advertising spending will grow fast enough to fund a privatised BBC without threatening existing commercial channels. As for the alternative of making the BBC depend on voluntary subscriptions, the BBC's Chairman, Sir Christopher Bland, has claimed, without giving his reasons, that the BBC would do well financially although it would cease to be a more or less universally watched service (*Guardian* 12 June 97). In light of the experience of Public Service Broadcasting in the USA this attitude on the part of the corporation's chairman ought to give rise to more concern than it seems to have; see James Ledbetter, *Made Possible By: the death of public broadcasting* in the United States, London: Verso, 1997.
- 29 Countries may designate certain national sporting events as 'crown jewels' for which the television rights may only be sold for 'free to air' (i.e. non-subscription channel) broadcasting.
- 30 In July 1997 the BBC announced plans to put Radio 4's early morning news and public affairs programme 'Today' and BBC1's 'Breakfast News' under the control of a single editor, foreshadowing the unification of their news staffs: 'the idea is the latest proposal to cut costs on the BBC's daily news output on television and radio to help finance the launch of a 24-hour TV news service. More than 100 jobs could go... although new posts are to be created on the 24-hour channel' (*Guardian* 16 July 1997). The Director General of the BBC told the House of Commons Select Committee on the National Heritage that the corporation was facing a £40 million revenue shortfall by the beginning of the next century.
- 31 The BBC gets £1.8 bn per annum from about 20 million people paying a £90 licence fee; ITV gets £1.7 bn from advertising; Murdoch's Bskyb satellite channel package costing £300 per annum is subscribed to by four million viewers, for a total of about £1.2 billion, much of which is spent on sports and film rights.
- 32 The Director General of the Institute of Practitioners in Advertising was quoted as saying that the BBC was 'behaving like a commercial competitor' and that the IPA 'would back [ITV's] attempts to move News at Ten [the main news programme, which the ITC requires to be at 10pm] to allow uninterrupted films and dramas at 9pm' (*Guardian* 28 May 1997). The attempt was unsuccessful in 1997.
- 33 See especially James **Curran**, 'Mass Media and Democracy', op. cit., pp. 105-12. For a more philosophical reflection on the principles of a democratic public sphere see also John Keane, *The Media and Democracy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991, especially chapters 5 and 6.
- 34 On this see also R. Collins and C. Murrioni, *New Media New Politics*, Cambridge: Polity 1996, pp. 150-54.
- 35 M. **Linton**, 'Winning Ways', *Free Press*, January-February, 1996; Jean **Seaton**, 'Down With Aunt **Tabitha**: A Modest Media Proposal', in Pimlott, B., and T. Wright (eds.), *The Alternative*, London: W.H. Allen, 1990.
- 36 The unions learned a painful lesson in this regard when a new left-wing Sunday

tabloid newspaper, the News **On Sunday**, was launched in 1987 with £6.5 million largely provided by them. The idea was that the new print technology had created the opportunity for new papers to enter the market by lowering the cost barriers to entry. The paper folded **after** 6 weeks. In 1996 **Curran** estimated that at least £20 million would be needed to establish a new national newspaper in Britain ('Welfare vs. Free Market', op. **cit.**, p. 135).

- 37 The 1988 TWF directive laid down that all stations and channels broadcasting in the European Union must have 51 per cent domestic content - but with the proviso 'wherever practicable', added at the instigation of **Mrs Thatcher**, acting at the behest of President Reagan and the US film industry. This proviso effectively nullifies an important part of the directive's intentions and in 1997 the US film industry joined forces with European commercial broadcasters and the telecommunications industry to lobby successfully against its removal. On the other hand they were unable to get the directive abolished, as they wished. The directive also explicitly authorises states to prohibit the sale of exclusive broadcasting rights to national sports events. Furthermore a general Public Service Broadcasting Protocol to the EU treaties was adopted in 1997, which in principle protects the right of all EU states to define, fund and organise public **service** broadcasting without challenge from private sector interests on the grounds of its being an obstacle to free competition.