2 Media and the paradoxes of pluralism

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Theories and concepts, on which normative views of media and democracy build, have generally taken a pluralist or anti-essentialist turn in recent decades. While notions such as 'media quality' or 'public interest' are increasingly contested, pluralism and diversity not only have become indisputable values, but also rank among the few politically correct criteria for assessing media performance and regulation. Hardly anyone would disagree with the idea that citizens need to have access to a broad range of political views, cultural expressions and aesthetic experiences in the public sphere. The meaning and nature of pluralism as a normative principle, however, remain vague and arguably under-theorised.

Much of the confusion surrounding the notions of pluralism and diversity in media studies undoubtedly stems from their disparate uses in different contexts, but there is also a certain ambiguity inherent in the concept of pluralism itself. As Gregor McLennan (1995: 7) has noted, the constitutive vagueness of pluralism as a social value gives it enough ideological flexibility for it to be capable of signifying reactionary tendencies in one phase of the debate and progressive values in the next. Pluralism thus constitutes a highly contentious and elusive principle in political and social theory as well as for evaluating the performance of the media.

Taking some distance from the attractiveness of commonsense pluralism, this chapter focuses on some paradoxical dimensions in the present discussion on pluralism and the public sphere. Reflecting the renewed emphasis on pluralism in political theory, normative models of deliberative democracy and the public sphere have been increasingly criticised for overemphasising social unity and rational consensus. Instead of a singular notion of the public sphere, public use of reason or the common good, theorists increasingly stress the plurality of public spheres, politics of difference and the complexity of ways in which the media can contribute to democracy. As a result, various radical-pluralist theories of democracy that have attempted to develop less rigidly normative conceptions of democracy and the public sphere have gained more and more prominence also in media studies. In contrast to the allegedly rationalistic and monistic thrust of the Habermasian public sphere approach, they are often seen to resonate

better with the chaotic and complex nature of the contemporary media landscape.

I discuss the implications and potential significance of the radical-pluralist approach for media studies and media policy here by drawing mainly from the political philosophy of Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2000, 2005), whose model of 'agonistic pluralism' constitutes one of the most prominent alternatives to deliberative conceptions of democracy. The rationale for this is twofold. First, agonistic pluralism provides a fundamental critique of the traditional Habermasian approach to the public sphere and democracy. Second, and perhaps more important, I argue that her ideas also provide an equally strong critique of 'naive pluralism' that celebrates all multiplicity and diversity without paying attention to the continued centrality of the questions of power and exclusion in the public sphere.

As McLennan (1995: 83–4) notes, one of the main problems with any 'principled pluralist' perspective remains how to conceptualise the need for pluralism and diversity without falling into the trap of flatness, relativism, indifference, and unquestioning acceptance of market-driven difference and consumer culture. While Mouffe's approach itself is open to criticism on many fronts, it serves as a good starting point for illustrating some of the problems in debating the value of pluralism in media politics. The purpose of discussing the agonistic approach here is therefore not to argue for more pluralism as such. Instead, it serves to question the inclusiveness of current pluralistic discourses and emphasise the continued importance of analysing relations of power in contemporary public spheres. While the problems of 'naive pluralism' are certainly not foreign to contemporary media policy, the agonistic model of democracy is discussed here as a possible theoretical basis for bringing the current 'ethos of pluralisation' to bear also on the level of media structures and politics.

The ambiguity of pluralism

The idea of pluralism as a crucial social and political value is nothing new. Premised on the impossibility of unambiguously establishing truth, right or good, especially in social and political affairs, pluralism is one of the constitutive tenets of liberal democracy. According to Mouffe (2000: 18), the acceptance of pluralism, understood as 'the end of a substantive idea of the good life', is the most important single defining feature of modern liberal democracy that differentiates it from ancient models of democracy.

At its broadest definition, pluralism can simply be defined as a theorised preference for multiplicity over unity and diversity over uniformity in whatever field of enquiry (McLennan 1995: 25). In this sense, almost all particular discourses could be conceived as reflecting some aspect of the pluralism/monism interface, and for McLennan, rather than as a specific

ideology, pluralism is best conceived as a general intellectual orientation, whose specific manifestations would be expected to change depending on the context.

Despite, or perhaps because of, its ubiquitous nature, it can be argued that sometimes pluralism itself has become the new foundation of social theory. John Keane (1992), for instance, has argued that political values of democracy and freedom of speech themselves should be conceived as means and necessary preconditions of protecting philosophical and political pluralism, rather than as foundational principles themselves. While accepting multiplicity and pluralism has become almost endemic to recent social theory, various universal forms of politics have given way to a new pluralist imaginary associated with identity politics and politics of difference (see Benhabib 2002). As Anne Phillips (2000: 238) notes, there has been 'an explosion of new literature on what are seen as the challenges of diversity and difference' – which according to Bonnie Honig (1996: 60) is 'just another word for what used to be called pluralism'.

Instead of the utopia of a rationally based unitary public sphere, many argue that democracy needs to be seen as pluralised and marked by new kinds of politics of difference. For writers like Keane the ideal of a unified public sphere and its corresponding vision of a unitary public of citizens are becoming increasingly obsolete. Similarly, in media studies, Elizabeth Jacka (2003: 183) has argued that, instead of universal visions of the common good, democracy needs to be seen as based on 'pragmatic and negotiated exchanges about ethical behaviour and ethically inspired courses of action', and we need to 'countenance a plurality of communication media and modes in which such a diverse set of exchanges will occur'. Such a pluralist approach would then be inclusive of different genres of media texts and different forms of media organisation, not privileging 'high modern journalism' as a superior form of rational communication.

In the context of the media, the attraction of pluralism would seem to be closely linked to the attacks on universal quality criteria or other unambiguous criteria for assessing media performance. In this sense, pluralism not only constitutes a perspective for assessing the performance of the media but also a form of political rationality that directly concerns media policy. According to Nielsen (2003), the ideas that all forms of culture contain their own criteria of quality have broken the universal basis for defining cultural quality and have led to a 'pluralistic consensus' in media and cultural policy. The notions of quality, cultural value or public interest are thus increasingly conceived in a relativist manner, avoiding the paternalism of the old paradigm of media policy.

The problem with the pluralistic consensus, however, lies in the ambiguity of pluralism as a normative principle. In a general sense, we are all pluralists, but on closer analysis it seems that the emphasis on pluralism and diversity will inevitably create its own pathologies and paradoxes.

Pluralism and diversity may remain inherently good, but, as McLennan (1995: 8) writes, in deconstructing their value we are faced with questions of the following order. Is there not a point at which healthy diversity turns into unhealthy dissonance? Does pluralism mean that anything goes? And what exactly are the criteria for stopping the potentially endless multiplication of valid ideas?

According to Louise Marcil-Lacoste (1992), pluralism entails a certain ambiguity 'between the over-full and the empty': on the one hand, pluralism suggests abundance, flowering and expansion of values and choices, but, on the other hand, it also evokes emptiness. To recognise or promote plurality in some context is to say nothing about the nature of its elements and issues, their relations, and value. Stemming from this, pluralism can combine both critique and evasion. It involves critique of all monisms and it aims to deconstruct their foundational claims. Yet there is also evasion, in terms of its refusal to develop substantive normative positions concerning social, political and economic processes (ibid.).

In many ways, the ethos of evasiveness and vacuousness is not foreign to contemporary debates in media studies and media policy either. Particularly for those concerned with institutional politics and media structures, postmodern anti-foundationalism and particularism have often represented an irrational threat to modern democratic ideals. If there is no rational basis or common standard for evaluating the media, it is feared, relativism will take over and the 'politics of difference' will lead to a 'politics of indifference'. Given that pluralism is a notion that necessarily generates consensus and does not impose any limits, its flip side is that it indicates no specific content and fails to resolve the problems associated with media structure and democratic regulation of the media. For this reason, there is a need to analyse the different levels and meanings of the concept and the problems it involves.

Pluralism and the public sphere

Although pluralism may have a number of other justifications, I will here focus only on the status of pluralism in democratic theory and political philosophy. As mentioned before, liberal theorists of democracy have long seen pluralism and the clash of divergent opinions and interests in various realms of social life as mediating progress (Bobbio 1990: 21–4). Perhaps most famously this point was made by J. S. Mill (1859/1986), who defended freedom of speech by arguing that all opinions, whether true or false, must have their place in public so that their merits can be openly evaluated. The legacy of liberal pluralism for media regulation, however, has been far from unproblematic. Liberal media policy discourses commonly conceptualise pluralism in terms of 'the free market place of ideas' – although the metaphor and its corresponding tenets of minimal regulation and freedom

of choice for consumers actually represent rather poorly the original ideas of Mill (see Gordon 1997; Baum 2001; Splichal 2002).

Given the long tradition of critique from the critical political economy of communication, the notion of free choice in the market place has proved a far from adequate framework for conceptualising media pluralism or any other goals for media policy other than economic ones. In response, critical scholars have instead mostly employed the notion of the public sphere as a theoretical framework in which to seek grounding for the value of media pluralism.

In general, it is arguably around the notion of the public sphere that most fruitful interaction between political theory and media studies has taken place in the last decades. While much of the debate on the media and the public sphere draws upon Habermas's early work (1989), the public sphere is also more broadly understood as a general context of interaction where citizens get informed and public discussion takes place. In this general sense of the concept, voicing of diverse views and access to a wide range of information and experiences are rarely questioned as a precondition for citizens' effective participation in public life.

On reflection, however, it becomes evident that the concept of the public sphere also includes an aspect of commonality and unity. The relationship between pluralism and the commonality inherent in the notion of the public sphere has proven to be one of the central points of contention in recent democratic theory. It can be argued that at some point the emphasis on diversity and pluralism runs against the imaginary presuppositions of democracy itself, so that there is an inherent tension between pluralism and 'publicness' (McLennan 1995: 92). Similarly, Mouffe speaks of 'the democratic paradox': how to envisage a form of commonality strong enough to institute a 'demos' but nevertheless compatible with true religious, moral, cultural and political pluralism (Mouffe 2000: 64)? Consequently, the relative status of universal and plural conceptions of the public sphere has also been one of the key sources of contention in theorising the relationship between media and democracy (see Born 2006).

As the theoretical framework that has dominated much of the recent theorising on the role of the media in democracy, the idea of deliberative democracy tries to reconcile this tension by making the discursive formation of the public sphere the essence of political community. In contrast to liberal pluralism or communitarianism, the deliberative approach thus denies the pluralism of fixed differences (individual or community) that lead to either an aggregation model of individual interests or irreducible community identities. Instead, the emphasis on difference is complemented, and qualified, with an emphasis on the strong public sphere of rational-critical deliberation (see Dahlberg 2005).

In the approaches informed by deliberative democracy, the role of the public sphere and the media is then conceptualised in terms of the 'public use of reason' by free and equal citizens. It provides a norm

of rational-critical deliberation, which is free from state and corporate interests, inclusive, aimed at understanding and agreement, reasoned and reflexive. As certain social institutions evidently encourage this type of communication more than others, it also provides an explicitly normative framework, which has sparked a wealth of debate on the relationship between the media and democracy.

The ideal of deliberative democracy, however, has not escaped criticism. For many, the rational-critical basis of the public sphere delivers an overly rationalist conception which, despite claims that it makes room for difference, fails to theorise pluralism adequately. Drawing on theorists such as Foucault and Lyotard, critics see that the deliberative emphasis on communicative reason leads inevitably to a support for the *status quo* of exclusions and inequalities, because it fails to acknowledge the normalising tendencies involved in the designation of a particular form of communication as the rational, democratically legitimate norm (see, for instance, Villa 1992; Fraser 1992; Baumeister 2003; Gardiner 2004).

Much of the criticism is arguably based on a rather simplified reading of deliberative democracy and especially Habermas's later work, which can be seen as advocating a much more plural conception of public spheres (see Brady 2004; Dahlberg 2005). Still, the emphasis on rational consensus is commonly seen to underestimate the depth of societal pluralism and the fundamental nature of value conflicts, in terms of cultural difference and structural conflicts of interest. The general thrust of deliberative democracy is thus seen as too dependent on the view that a benign social order must be grounded in the ideal of consensus. While social reality is increasingly conceived as a chaotic situation of diversity and pluralism, the insistence on consensus is seen as too idealised, too unrealistic and too academic (see Rescher 1993).

In short, the stress on consensus and universal criteria of rationality is seen as leading to an over-centralised model of the public sphere that is incompatible with societal pluralism and that inevitably ignores inequalities between social groups and their specific needs. Iris Marion Young (1997: 401) among others has argued that the defining characteristic of a public is plurality and it is irreducible to a single denominator. Therefore a conception of publicity that requires its members to put aside their differences in order to uncover the common good is seen to destroy its very meaning. Or even more bluntly as Bauman (1997: 202) puts it: 'Habermas's "perfect communication", which measures its own perfection by consensus and the exclusion of dissent, is another dream of death which radically cures the ills of freedom's life.'

One of the hallmarks of 'post-Habermasian' political theory, then, seems to be its distancing from the emphasis on rational consensus. As a result, theorising about the public sphere has taken a markedly pluralistic turn in the past decades. The most notable implication of this is the rejection of a universal or singular idea of the public sphere in favour of a plurality

of public spheres, conceptualised as a complex field of multiple contesting publics; a revision that even Habermas himself has now largely conceded.

From rational consensus to agonistic pluralism

In light of the above critiques of deliberative democracy, agonistic, or radical-pluralist, theories of democracy have recently emerged among the most prominent alternative imaginaries in democratic thought. Radical-pluralist theories of democracy typically maintain that civil society is not harmonious or unitary but, rather, characterised by conflicts of interest and an irreducible pluralism of values. Consequently, any system of rational consensus is seen as not only utopian, but also dangerous and necessarily exclusive.

   If theories of deliberative democracy and the public sphere have essentially tried to reconcile the tension between pluralism and commonality by placing emphasis on agreement among rational inquirers, the agonistic model of democracy advocated by Chantal Mouffe can be seen as its direct antithesis:

> The belief in the possibility of a universal rational consensus has put democratic thinking on the wrong track. Instead of trying to design the institutions which, though supposedly 'impartial' procedures, would reconcile all conflicting interests and values, the task for democratic theorists and politicians should be to envisage the creation of a vibrant 'agonistic' public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted.
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> (Mouffe 2005: 3)

The underlying argument here is that the ideal of rational-critical deliberative public sphere fails to address power and existing forms of exclusion. Furthermore, it has not adequately theorised the themes of plurality, openness and undecidability, and thus inevitably excludes the articulation of difference and conflict outside democratic deliberation. As Mouffe (2000: 49) argues, 'consensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be – the expression of hegemony and the crystallisation of power relations ... [and] because it postulates the availability of consensus without exclusion, the model of deliberative democracy is unable to envisage liberal-democratic pluralism in an adequate way'. While Habermas conceives the public sphere as an arena of rational and critical debate leading to a consensus, radical pluralists argue that democracy should be conceived as agonistic confrontation or continued contestation.

   Another mistake of liberal rationalism that Mouffe (2005: 6) sees as characteristic of deliberative democracy is to ignore the affective dimension mobilised by collective identifications and passions in politics.

In Habermas's approach, the separation of the private realm, the realm of irreconcilable value pluralism, and the realm of the public, where rational consensus can be reached, is a key distinction. According to Mouffe, what this separation really does is to circumscribe a domain that would not be subject to the pluralism of values and where a consensus without exclusion could be established. In assuming that all differences could be relegated to the private sphere through the construction of a procedurally based rational consensus, deliberative democrats ignore the irresolvable nature of conflicts over political values. They 'relegate pluralism to a non-public domain in order to insulate politics from its consequences' (Mouffe 2000: 33, 91–2).

Agonistic pluralism also requires abandoning the essentialism dominant in the liberal interpretation of pluralism and acknowledging the contingency and ambiguity of social identities. Identities are never fixed, but always contested. An agonistic public sphere is thus not only an arena for the formation of discursive public opinion, or the aggregation of predefined interests, but also a site for the formation and contestation of social identities. Consequently, one of the main uses for the agonistic approach for scholars in media and cultural studies has been to promote a model of the public sphere which takes into account not only rational debate, but also questions of emotion, passion, identity and their importance in media use.

Radical pluralism and media politics

When applied to normative debates on the media, such radical-pluralist critique has obviously found most of its resonance as a critique of the biases and flaws of existing normative frameworks. In a way, this also reflects the division of democratic theories into (1) those oriented to democratising or rationalising the procedures of decision making and (2) those confined more explicitly to the processes of resistance and contestation as inherently valuable. As Bonnie Honig (1993: 2) writes, the radical pluralist approach justifies itself above all as a critique of political theorists that measure their success by the elimination of dissonance and conflict, and thus confine politics to the tasks of stabilising moral and political subjects, building consensus, or consolidating communities and identities. Radical pluralism thereby explicitly aims to shift the emphasis of democratic politics to the processes of dislocation, contestation and resistance.

While both logics may have merits, the role of the media has never been understood so much in terms of direct participation in state power but primarily in terms of a critique of other centres of power. Even Habermas (1996: 359) demoted the public sphere to the status of a 'warning system with sensors that, though unspecialised, are sensitive through society' and has thereby seemingly relieved it from the burden of solving problems or having to produce a rational solution to political questions. In this sense,

it is easy to understand why an approach that emphasises the aspects of contestation and dislocation (instead of the utopia of rationalising society through some universal principles) seems particularly attractive in theorising the role of the contemporary media.

The demand for new theoretical perspectives thus seems evident. As Georgina Born (2006) has argued, current debates on media policy have tended not to pay sufficient attention to the implications of pluralism for contemporary media. At the same time, however, she argues that media policy analysts have baulked at the challenge of founding ideas for reform on normative rationales or political philosophy.

The problem seems to be that while the Habermasian public sphere approach has long been mobilised as a normative backbone in debates on media structure and policy, for instance in defence of public service broadcasting, the implications of radical pluralist perspectives for the media have been much less debated. In fact, it seems that a lack of institutional proposals or of interest in concrete political questions is a more widespread feature of postmodern theories of radical difference and pluralism (McLennan 1995: 85). These perspectives have been used more as oppositional discourses or critical tools in questioning various monisms of media studies and political economy, and not as coherent normative theories that would pertain to questions of media structure and policy.

For many critics, this affirms the problems of evasiveness and vacuousness in postmodern and radical pluralist perspectives. While most acknowledge that they often provide valuable critique, they get criticised for their refusal to develop substantive normative positions. This has led some critics to argue that with the emphasis on diversity, difference and the proliferation of identity movements, politics is becoming pluralised to the point of being trivialised.

Just as the 'old pluralism' of liberal individualism and interest group politics was marked by a strategic avoidance of political economy and questions of power (see McClure 1992), it can be argued that the 'new pluralism' of identity politics is similarly marked by indifference and relativism towards broader political and economic structures. In concentrating on the formation of multiple identities it neglects the unequal possibilities open to different groups. Nancy Fraser (1997), for instance, speaks of a divide between politics of redistribution, understood in material, institutional, political-economic terms, and the 'ethos of pluralisation' found on the level of micro-politics and the symbolic realm. In its denial of all universalism and systemic concerns, Fraser argues, the discourse of pluralisation has so far been incapable of dealing with macro-political concerns.

Against naive pluralism

It seems that at times the emphasis on pluralism and complexity echoes the postmodern antipathy towards all kinds of social centralism and planning

and leads to a more general critique of all kinds of 'cultural policing', which are seen as attempts to stabilise or stifle difference, to create political closure or to define in other ways the acceptable limits of pluralism from above. In the absence of alternatives, much of the theoretical reflection on media and democracy remains either explicitly or implicitly based on normative models derived from the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, which critics claim is unnecessarily pessimistic and one-dimensional. As a carry-over from the pessimism of Habermas's initial formulations of the public sphere, it would seem that growing social disintegration and cultural fragmentation are inevitably counterproductive to the ideals the media ought to serve, imposing a theoretical frame that one critic calls 'democracy as defeat' (Jacka 2003).

Consequently, radical-pluralist perspectives have been employed mainly as counter-narratives to the Habermasian approach. For authors with a more optimistic outlook, the key development that is supposedly making a more pluralist media system possible is the growth of channel availability that allows ever greater diversity and choice, catering to more and more specialist tastes and needs (Jacka 2003: 188). Pluralistic democracy is then seen to be realised when people can freely construct their identities by choosing from the ever-expanding options in the public sphere.

Following this line of reasoning, John Hartley, for instance, has coined the notion of 'semiotic democracy' to separate democracy from the tediousness of collective action and to re-articulate it with questions of self-realisation and the choices people make for themselves. Interpreting citizenship primarily in terms of identity and difference, Hartley invents the concept of 'do-it-yourself citizenship' as 'the practice of putting together an identity from the available choices, patterns and opportunities on offer in the semiosphere and the mediasphere' (1999: 178). Seeking 'democratisation without politicisation', writers like Jacka and Hartley envisage a shift from political democracy to semiotic democracy, a future of post-political, post-adversarial citizenship that is based on semiotic self-determination – choices people make for themselves – rather than state coercion or paternalism.

Such postmodern anti-paternalism, which leans on the recognition of complexity and plurality, is founded on resistance to any central rationalist planning and the denial of any systematic or integrative metatheories. However, based on such praise of individual cultural autonomy and choice, it is no wonder if the current stress on popular consumption, active audiences and individual creation of meaning is mistaken for the neoliberal idea of consumer sovereignty. It can be argued that the discussion of pluralism in media studies and media policy has often taken a form of naive celebration of all multiplicity, which all too easily converges with the neoliberal illusion of free choice.

My purpose here is to argue that it is precisely this kind of 'naive pluralism' and the evacuation of political economy that the radical-pluralist

approach in democratic theory is aimed against. Contrary to the post-modern celebration of pluralism, Mouffe has explicitly argued that radical pluralism must be distinguished from the forms of postmodern politics which emphasise heterogeneity and incommensurability to the extent of valorising all differences. Because of its refusal to acknowledge the relations of power involved in 'constructions of differences', such naive pluralism, Mouffe (2000: 20) argues, is compatible with the liberal evasion of politics, and converges with the typical liberal illusion of pluralism without antagonism. Instead, for radical pluralism to be compatible with the struggle against inequality, one must also acknowledge the limits of pluralism.

Equally critical of ideas such as life politics or subpolitics – which the notion of semiotic democracy would seem to reflect – Mouffe (2005: 54) has explicitly stressed the need to acknowledge the crucial role played by economic and political power in the structuring of the hegemonic order. Instead of standing for dissolution of politics into semiotic democracy, personal therapy, or individual do-it-yourself citizenship, she has stressed that the democratisation of any social institution is above all a political task.

It is by emphasising questions of power and exclusion that radical pluralism therefore takes its distance from both the liberal notion of the free market place of ideas and the postmodern praise of all difference. I argue that, in media studies, the radical-pluralist approach is best interpreted, not as praise of multiplicity as such, but as a call to recognise the aspect of power, exclusion and control inherent in all conceptions of the public sphere. As such, it departs from the political minimalism of liberal pluralism, for, in contrast to the view that pluralism is best protected by restricting politics to its bare essentials, radical pluralists contend that spaces in which differences may constitute themselves as contending identities are today most efficiently established by political means (see Connolly 1991: xi). There is no reason in principle, then, why the radical-pluralist perspective should be incompatible with questions of media policy or political economy.

Rethinking pluralism, choice and regulation

Among the central metaphors through which policies on media pluralism or almost any other public policy are conceived today are the market place and 'choice'. As Zygmunt Bauman (1997: 93) puts it, freedom of choice has become the main stratifying variable in our multidimensionally stratified societies, to an extent that choosing is everybody's fate. The only differences are the ranges of realistic choices and the resources needed to make them.

Of course, in the tradition of critical political economy of the media, models based on free competition and choice have long been criticised for

ignoring that choice is always pre-structured by the existing conditions of competition. As Splichal (1999: 291) argues, the 'plurality' of the media as such is not a reliable indicator of a society's level of freedom, since it may create only the illusion of content diversity by hiding the fact that all mass communication processes are restrained by different forms of indirect control exercised by both the state and private corporations, ranging from formal regulation to pressures of advertising and subsidisers. A realistic question is thus not whether there will be forms of political intervention or regulation in the future, but rather what form they should take, what values they are based on and how these decisions are arrived at.

More eloquently, Bauman (1999: 73–8) explains that, throughout modernity, the principal tool of 'setting the agenda for choice' or pre-selection has been legislation, a tool which political institutions are now abandoning. However, this 'liberalisation' does not necessarily mean that the freedom of choice is expanding, but that the power of pre-selection is being ceded to non-political institutions, above all markets themselves. Consequently, the codes or criteria of pre-selection are changing, and, among the values towards which choosers are trained to orient their choices, short-term pleasure, hedonism, entertainment and other market-generated needs come to occupy a privileged place. So, according to Bauman, the late modern emphasis on freedom of choice and individual autonomy has not really increased individual freedom, but has instead led to 'unfreedom', the transformation of a political citizen to a consumer of market goods.

This illustrates the point about how the equation of media pluralism with free choice fails to take into account the wider relations of power in which the media are situated. Contrary to the language of 'the free market place of ideas' where the market is seen as a self-regulating and spontaneous mediator, the market itself is a politically designed institution, not a homogeneous, unstructured and unregulated natural entity (see Keane 1992: 119). The actual shape of the markets must always be crafted by political and legal regulation and it hardly emerges spontaneously as a neutral mediator of civil society. Any market also imposes its own criteria of pre-selection and construction of difference. In other words, every kind of system necessarily limits the range of public choices, yet all of them have a tendency to present this process of pre-selection as neutral or natural while in truth their criteria are inevitably political, in the broad sense of the word.

If structural inequalities and conflicts are ineradicable, as Mouffe argues, the main question regarding the public sphere is then not how to bracket or even eradicate relations of power, but rather to recognise and make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of political contestation. Power relations can be modified and room can be made for a plurality of alternative modes of power. A crucial question for media studies informed

by radical pluralism thus remains: what institutional arrangements will best help narrow the gap in participatory parity between dominant and subordinate groups and create a plurality of power structures that are maximally open to democratic contestation (Fraser 1992: 122)?

Based on this, we can understand radical pluralism, not as a postmodern celebration of spontaneous multiplicity, but as a call for attention to institutional restructuring and macro-political concerns that also pertain to the political economy of the media. In this sense it arguably provides even stronger normative framework for media reform than the traditional Habermasian framework. It is due to the separation of the communicative realm from the systemic spheres of money and power that Dryzek (2000: 26), for instance, has concluded that, if it provides no sense of how political and economic structures should be further democratised, it is difficult to regard Habermas's theory of democracy as a contribution to critical theory. While Habermas assumes that participants in ideal public deliberation somehow bracket inequalities and treat each other as equal, his radical-pluralist critics like Mouffe claim that, in practice, the structural inequalities are undistinguishable from the actual communicative practices. In this sense they also conceivably pay more attention to their modification.

In fact the issues here are quite similar to those raised by Nicholas Garnham regarding identity politics. While one form of identity politics is a claim for recognition and toleration, another aspect is a claim on scarce resources, such as access to the media, cultural subsidies or production resources. Yet 'too often there is an attempt to combine a request for recognition and a share of public resources that such recognition brings with it and, at the same time, demonise the very common decision making, the politics, that must inevitably go with such resource distribution' (Garnham 2003: 198).

All in all, I argue that there is no reason why radical-pluralist arguments could not be used to defend concrete institutional arrangements in media policy. (For one of the few attempts to do this see Craig 1999.) Public service broadcasting or support for alternative media structures, for instance, can be seen as key tools in creating a plurality of power structures that are open to democratic contestation and that resist the hegemonic tendencies of the market.

Conclusion

I began by pointing to some contradictions and paradoxes in using pluralism as a catch-all value in media politics. While many current arguments in media policy point back to some of the central problems with pluralism – both philosophically and politically – it is not my purpose to argue that pluralism should not remain an important value in contemporary media policy.

However, it is important to note that, regardless of their popularity, pluralism and diversity have their limits as policy principles. Not only are there limits to pluralism in both political-economic and ethical terms, the concept of pluralism itself does not offer much unambiguous basis for the demands of democratic politics on the media, but rather constitutes itself an object of political contestation. With developments in media technology it is becoming even less clear in which sense it is meaningful to speak of media pluralism, if the media landscape is characterised more by abundance and limitless choice than by scarcity or lack of options.

What I have proposed here, by means of applying the idea of agonistic pluralism to the context of media politics, is that it is not enough to conceive media pluralism in terms of heterogeneity and a diversification of options. Instead, it needs to be analysed in connection with the structural relations of power that define the criteria that guide systems of representation and limit the available choices. Posed as an alternative to both liberal minimalism and to the rationalistic idealisations of deliberative democracy, the radical pluralist approach can thus be understood as an argument for the continuing centrality of question of power in media politics. The danger of what I called 'naive pluralism' is therefore that such questions are veiled or ignored under the illusion of communicative abundance or limitless choice. Unequal relations of power remain crucial in the field of media policy and media institutions and there is no reason to think that technological or any other developments will lead to spontaneous harmony.

This points to the continued relevance of the critical political economy of communication, and its attempts to reveal and analyse structural hierarchies of power that influence and shape our media environment. And as such analysis usually leads to normative questions, it also demands that we continually engage with normative political theory of different orientations to test our normative assumptions.

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