

Against naïve pluralism in media politics: on the implications of the radical-pluralist approach to the public sphere

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In theorizing the public sphere and the relationship between media and democracy, the importance of the principles of difference, diversity and pluralism only seems to heighten. It can be argued that the theories and concepts on which normative views of media and democracy build have generally taken a marked pluralist or anti-essentialist turn. Reflecting this, normative models of deliberative democracy and the public sphere have been increasingly criticized for overemphasizing rational consensus and disregarding the irreducible value of pluralism in contemporary societies. Instead of a singular notion of the public sphere, public use of reason or the common good, theorists increasingly stress the plurality of publics, politics of difference and the complexity of ways in which the media can contribute to democracy.

In part, the emphasis on pluralism can be seen as an expression of a general postmodern suspicion of universalism and unifying discourses generally, but arguably it also constitutes a form of political rationality that directly concerns media and cultural policy. The emphasis on pluralism, however, will inevitably create its own problems in both theory and practice. As McLennan (1995) notes, it may seem that all things plural, diverse and open-ended are automatically to be regarded as good. But in deconstructing the value of pluralism, 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? In the context of increasingly complex and at least in some sense diversified media landscape, how to conceptualize pluralism as a political value without falling into anti-political relativism and indifference remains a crucial question.

Such questions have been raised particularly in relation to perspectives that tend to conceptualize pluralism in the public sphere in terms of multiculturalism or politics of recognition and their sometimes uneasy relationship with the structural and political concerns found in critical theories of the public sphere. In political theory more generally, Nancy Fraser (1997) and Anne Phillips (2000), among others, have noted a divide between politics of redistribution, understood in material and institutional terms, and the ethos of pluralization found on the level of micro-politics and the symbolic realm. For Fraser (1997: 2), one of the main impediments to progressive political thought has thus been the incapacity of identity politics and various radical-democratic and multicultural perspectives to deal adequately with questions of political economy. In media studies particularly, for those explicitly concerned with institutional politics and media structures, the postmodern critique of universalism and rationality often represents an irrational threat to the modern democratic ideals (Garnham, 2000; McChesney, 2000; McGuigan, 1997). If there is no rational basis or common standards for evaluating the media, it is feared that relativism will take over; 'politics of difference' will lead to 'politics of indifference'.

The aim of this commentary is to raise some of the contradictions in the normative and conceptual underpinnings of the present discussion on pluralism and media politics from the perspective of democratic theory. In particular, I discuss the radical-pluralist, or agonistic, theories of democracy, and their potential significance in the context of media studies and media policy. The radical-pluralist approach, which I discuss primarily through Chantal Mouffe's recent work, will serve as a starting point in two senses. First, it poses a fundamental critique of the Habermasian conception of deliberative democracy and the public sphere, which clearly has consequences for current debates on media and democracy (see Jacka, 2003). Perhaps more importantly though, radical pluralism poses an equally strong critique of the naive celebration of multiplicity and diversification as such, a critique which I argue has generally passed unregistered in the reception of Mouffe's ideas in media and cultural studies. While Mouffe's approach itself is certainly open to criticism, I draw here from her to counter some forms of what I call naïve pluralism in media and cultural studies. Instead, I will argue for an understanding of media structures and the public sphere in which the point is not to celebrate all multiplicity and heterogeneity but rather the effort to question the inclusiveness of current pluralist discourses and their understanding of economic and political power. This would then offer a possible perspective for also bringing the 'ethos of pluralization' to bear on the level of media structures and media policy.

Pluralization and the public sphere

The bulk of the discussion on media pluralism as a political value continues to be premised on the conceptual framework of the public sphere. As a general normative concept against which to assess the media, much of the debate draws upon Habermas's early work (1989), but also, more broadly, the public sphere is understood as a general context of interaction in which deliberation and discussion take place and citizens in general inform and form themselves into the public. In this general sense, voicing of diverse views and access to a wide range of information and experiences is 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. With aspects of both pluralism and integration prominent in the functions that the media are expected to serve in society, there seems to be an inherent tension between these aspects. The media are often seen as a central tool for integrating people into a political community, creating a common culture, national identity or a shared arena for public debate; aims that would seem in contradiction to the strong pluralist agenda. This relates to the idea in political theory that, at some point, the emphasis on diversity and pluralism runs against the imaginary presuppositions of democracy itself, that there is an inherent tension between pluralism and 'publicness' (McLennan, 1995: 92). Hence '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)?

Currently, the dominant answer to this paradox lies in the theories of deliberative democracy, which have also dominated much of the discussion on the role of the media in democracy. As a third model of democracy, beyond liberal and republican traditions, it places the normative core of political community in political participation and the discursive formation of public opinion – instead of some pre-political cultural community or aggregation of pre-defined individual interest (Habermas, 1996b). In the Habermasian understanding, the role of the public sphere and the media is then conceptualized in terms of the 'public use of reason' of free and equal citizens. The hypothetical media system built around this would then provide an impartial arena for public debate over matters of 'common interest' that is open to all, free from both state and market manipulation, and oriented to the critical-rational formation of the public opinion.

The Habermasian approach, however, has been heavily criticized over its treatment of pluralism and irreducible value differences. Also, it is claimed that the ideal of a rational-critical deliberative public sphere fails adequately to theorize power and thus inadequately addresses existing forms of exclusion (Fraser, 1992; Mansbridge, 1996; Mouffe, 2000; Villa, 1992). As Mouffe contends:

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. (2005: 3)

Even for those more sympathetic to Habermas's discourse-ethical approach, the emphasis on rational consensus, however idealized, has proved problematic in the way it underestimates the depth of societal pluralism and the fundamental nature of value conflicts, both in the sense of cultural differences as well as structural conflicts of interest (Baumeister, 2003; Benhabib, 2002; Bohman, 1995; Dryzek, 2000; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2006; Young, 2000). Or 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.'

As a result, theorizing about the public sphere has taken a marked pluralistic turn. The universal or singular idea of the public sphere has largely been rejected in favour of a plurality of counter- and sub-public spheres, conceptualized as various differentiated arenas of public action or communicating political views as well as social experiences; a revision that Habermas himself has now largely conceded (1992, 1996a). Another vein of criticism claims though that although even Habermas acknowledges the 'fact of pluralism' and value-conflict as inevitable, he continues to defend the ideal of deliberative democracy as an ideal based on the universal criteria of communicative rationality, thus retaining an emphasis on communicative rationality as a universal regulative ideal which guides deliberation and legitimates the outcomes of democratic procedures (see Baumeister, 2003: 746; Bohman, 1995). Then, is it enough if the arenas and levels of public debate have multiplied to many if there continues to be 'but one public reason', one universal standard of rationality? Therefore, it can be argued that Habermas has come to grips with the 'fact of pluralism' but not with 'metaethical pluralism', a view in which political life is characterized not by a search for the 'common standard' but by persistent conflict between incommensurable interests and values (see Crowder, 1994). The 'universal-rationalist' public sphere approach then underestimates the challenge social and cultural pluralism pose *both* (1) to the idea of shared collective identity, all-encompassing political culture and political consensus *and* (2) to the possibility of common procedures or forms of deliberation that are purportedly value-neutral and free from coercive power. While the revisions made by Habermas and his fellow deliberative democrats seem to address the first point to some degree, the second point remains a central point of disagreement between the deliberative democrats and their radical-pluralist critics. And thus, for many pluralists, Habermas remains an archetypically modernist thinker who strives to achieve a high degree of rational 'purity' and conceptual order typical of 'monistic' discourses (Gardiner, 2004: 30).

From rational consensus to agonistic pluralism

In this context, and explicitly directed against such ‘theoretical purity’, the radical-pluralist theories of democracy have recently surfaced as one of the most prominent alternative imaginaries in democratic theory. Chantal Mouffe’s arguments, first presented in a book written with Ernesto Laclau (1985) and developed in her recent works (1993, 2000, 2005), thus represent a wider radical-democratic critique of ‘political closure’: theories that seek to confine politics to a specific form of consolidated community that is implicitly oriented towards political unity. According to Bonnie Honig (1993: 2), most political theorists converge in their assumption that success lies in the elimination of dissonance, resistance and conflict, and thus they confine politics to the juridical, administrative or regulative tasks of stabilizing moral and political subjects, building consensus, or consolidating communities and identities. Thus, they rely on principles of right, rationality and law to protect their political theories from the conflict and uncertainty of political reality. In contrast to this logic of unity and consensus, the radical-pluralist approach tends to shift the emphasis of democratic politics to the processes of dislocation, contestation and resistance.

Following the above critique of Habermas, radical pluralism maintains that civil society is not harmonious or unitary, but rather characterized by structural relations of power, conflicts of interest and irreducible pluralism of values. Consequently, any system of rational consensus is seen as not only utopian, but also dangerous and necessarily exclusive. Furthermore, it is argued that proponents of deliberative democracy have not adequately theorized the themes of plurality, openness and undecidability, and thus inevitably exclude the articulation of difference and conflict from democratic deliberation. As Mouffe argues:

... consensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be – the expression of hegemony and the crystallization 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. (2000: 49)

While Habermas conceives the public sphere as an arena of rational and critical debate ideally leading to a consensus, radical pluralists thus argue that democracy should rather be conceived in terms of agonistic confrontation or continued contestation.

Another mistake of liberal rationalism, Mouffe argues, is to ignore the affective dimension mobilized by collective identifications and passions in politics (2005: 6). Drawing from the feminist critique of the separation of the private, the realm of irreconcilable value pluralism, and the realm of public, where rational consensus can be reached, she argues that what this separation really does is 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, liberal

rationalists 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).

However, while arguing for agonistic confrontation as necessary for democracy, she acknowledges that there will always be a need for certain amount of consensus in liberal democracy – hence 'the democratic paradox'. However, this need not (and cannot) be a rational consensus envisaged by deliberative democrats. Rather, she stresses that every consensus is provisional and exists as a temporal result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion. In other words, every consensus must be accompanied by dissent.

What, then, are the implications of radical pluralism for the media? While many tend to present the current debates in democratic theory as a clash between the monism of the 'politics of closure' and the liberating anti-essentialism of radical pluralism, they also mirror the division of democratic theories into those oriented to democratizing or rationalizing the procedures of decision-making and those confined more explicitly to the processes of resistance and contestation as inherently valuable. While both may have merits, the role of the media or the public sphere more generally has never been understood so much in terms of direct participation in state power as primarily in terms of critique of other centres of power. For even Habermas (1996a: 359) has demoted the public sphere to the status of a 'warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive through society', and 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 stressing the aspects of contestation and dislocation (instead of the utopia of rationalizing society through some universal principles), and which is more receptive to the multiplicity of voices and the complexity of power structures, seems particularly attractive in the context of the contemporary media.

Radical pluralism in media studies

While the Habermasian public sphere approach is often (and rather loosely) mobilized as a normative backbone in debates on media structure and policy, for instance in defence of public-service broadcasting, the implications of the radical-pluralist perspectives for the media are less debated. In fact, it seems that the lack of institutional proposals or interest in concrete political questions is a rather general feature among the postmodern theorists of radical difference and pluralism (McLennan, 1995: 85). Most notably, these perspectives have thus been used more as oppositional discourses or critical tools in criticizing various monisms of media studies and political economy, and not as coherent normative theories that would pertain to questions of media structure and policy.

In absence of alternatives, much of the theoretical discussion on media and democracy has thus been 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 Hartley (2004: 386) claims, the purpose of critical media studies has been ‘not to understand but to discipline’ existing media practices. As a carry-over from the pessimism of Habermas’s initial formulations of the public sphere, it would thus seem that growing social disintegration and cultural fragmentation are inevitably counter-productive to the ideals media ought to serve, imposing a theoretical frame of ‘democracy as defeat’ (Jacka, 2003).

Drawing explicitly from Mouffe, Elizabeth Jacka (2003: 183) argues that the dominant arguments in media policy, and especially those defending public-service broadcasting, are based on an outdated and indefensible theoretical ideal of a unitary public sphere that has little relevance in today’s society. Following Mouffe, she calls for a rejection of the abstract universal definition of the public that is opposed to the private realm of particularity and difference. Translated into practical terms, her criticism is particularly targeted at the elitism and paternalism of the criteria of quality and rationality inherent in the ideals of public-service broadcasting, which she sees as leading to exclusion of certain modes of expression in the public sphere. Instead of any utopia of a rationally based common public sphere, Jacka argues that democracy needs to be seen as pluralized, marked by new kinds of communities of identity that break the traditional public–private divide and ditch universal visions of the common good. Instead, if the relationship between media and democracy is seen as based on ‘pragmatic and negotiated exchanges about ethical behaviour and ethically inspired courses of action, then we will countenance a plurality of communication media and modes in which such a diverse set of exchanges will occur’ (Jacka, 2003: 183). Mirroring Mouffe’s defence of the role of passions in democracy, this approach would then be inclusive of different genres of media texts and forms of media organization, rather than privileging ‘high modern journalism’ as a superior form of rational communication.

Much of this reflects a wider dissatisfaction with the traditional critical political economy of the media and its premises. Leaning on theoretical and practical recognition of complexity, diversity and difference in criticizing the ‘representativeness’ of public-service media is thus nothing new. John Keane (1991), for instance, has acknowledged as self-evident that the repertoire of public-service programmes cannot exhaust the multitude of publics in a complex pluralist society. Instead, the public-service claim to ‘balance’ is a defence of virtual representation of a fictive whole, a resort to programming that stimulates the actual opinions and tastes of some of those to whom it is directed. Undeniably, the commitment to balance will, in some cases, close off contentious, unbalanced views, favour representatives of established social groups and, in effect, stabilize difference.

However, it seems that, at times, the emphasis on pluralism and complexity has opened the doors for a more general antipathy towards all kinds of 'cultural policing', which are seen as attempts to stabilize difference, create political closure or otherwise define the acceptable limits of pluralism from above. In this way, Jacka seeks support from Hartley's optimistic notion of semiotic democracy, which separates democracy from the tediousness of collective action and re-articulates it with questions of personal self-realization. Hartley (1999) refers by 'citizenship' primarily to identity and difference in the sense of identity politics, and invents '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' (Hartley, 1999: 178). In this formulation, then, 'citizenship is no longer simply a matter of a social contract between state and subject, no longer even a matter of acculturation to the heritage of a given community; DIY citizenship is a choice people can make for themselves' (1999: 178). It is thus claimed that there is a move, in postmodern democracy, from politics to ethics. Seeking 'democratization without politicization', 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, not state coercion or paternalism. Crucially, for them one of the key developments that is making semiotic democracy possible is the growth of channel availability that allows for ever greater diversity and choice, catering to more and more specialized tastes and needs (Jacka, 2003: 188). Semiotic democracy is thus seen to be realized when people can freely construct their identities by means of the ever expanding choice in the mediasphere.

These self-proclaimed 'post-political' perspectives, however, are actually rather antithetical to Mouffe's ideas of radical politics. Based on their cheerful praise of individual cultural autonomy and choice, it is no wonder that many have argued that the stress on popular consumption, active audiences and individual creation of meaning is actually quite complicit with the neoliberal idea of consumer sovereignty and the current liberal status quo. If social phenomena are increasingly treated as self-organizing chaotic systems that cannot be reduced to the logic of political regulation, what then is the difference between this and the Hayekian ideology of neoliberalism?

Re-thinking pluralism and regulation

With very few institutional or political suggestions coming from the post-modern end of media studies, the whole notion of 'media policy' inevitably seems to have the connotation of a modernist field of socio-cultural engineering and, inevitably, this mismatch of perspectives seems to lead to misapprehension. As Nicholas Garnham has appositely argued against Jacka:

You can argue for as much pluralism as you like, but in the end, and necessarily, decisions will be taken that affect to a greater or lesser extent all citizens. Indeed, that is why we have politics at all and why democracy matters as a form of that politics. (2003: 195–6)

One of the main philosophical problems with any ‘principled pluralist’ perspective thus remains where to draw the line; how to conceptualize the need for pluralism and diversity without falling in the trap of flatness, relativism, indifference and unquestioning acceptance of market-driven difference and consumer culture (see McLennan, 1995: 83–4).

If anywhere, this evacuation of the distribution of power and resources becomes apparent in calls to replace political democracy with ‘semiotic democracy’ and transfer the concept of democracy to the cultural sphere. In this sense, the argument for ‘democratization without politicization’ is the opposite of Mouffe’s (2005) arguments against the anti-political ideals of spontaneous harmony or absolute freedom that refuse to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension that is constitutive of ‘the political’. Instead of standing for the dissolution of politics into semiotic democracy, personal therapy or individual do-it-yourself citizenship, Mouffe stresses that democratization of any social institution is above all a political task:

What is at stake is our ability to think the ethics of the political. By that I understand the type of interrogation which is concerned with the normative aspects of politics, the values that can be realized with the collective action ... a subject matter that should be distinguished from morality, which concerns individual action. (1993: 113)

Furthermore, critical of the ideas of life politics or subpolitics, Mouffe has explicitly stressed the need acknowledge the crucial role played by economic power in the structuring of the hegemonic order (2005: 54). Contrary to writers like Hartley and Jacka, she has explicitly denied the type of pluralism that valorizes all forms of difference and espouses heterogeneity without any limits – not because it would be in conflict with the common good, but because what such pluralism misses are the dimensions of power and the *political*. Because of its refusal to acknowledge the relations of power and regulation involved in all ‘constructions of differences’, such naïve pluralism, Mouffe (2000: 20) argues, is compatible with the liberal evasion of politics, and converges with the typical liberal illusion of a pluralism without antagonism. Mouffe’s position here would thus seem to complement Fraser’s (1997) criticism of cultural politics of difference that override political-economic considerations and valorize agency within communicative practices without providing adequate attention to communicative constraints.

Radical pluralism is thus not constituted through liberal celebration of ‘more choice’ or as praise of multiplicity as such, but as a call to recognize the aspects of power, exclusion and selectivity inherent in all conceptions of

the public sphere. As Mouffe contends, every order is political and based on some form of exclusion. The public spheres, no matter how pluralized, are always charged with dynamics of power and the multiplication of publics does not remove the need to analyse the hierarchical structures and relations of these multiple publics and their relations to the wider structures of economic and political power. The key task for radical-pluralist democratic politics is thus not to bracket such relations of power but to make them visible so that they can enter the terrain of contestation.

However, recognition of power and exclusion as inherent in all communication does not mean that some institutions or practices cannot be deemed more inclusive or more democratic than some others. This is of direct relevance to the perspectives that celebrate the communicative abundance of contemporary media as a path to a new post-political semiotic democracy where the need for regulation will subside. For as Keane (1999) notes, even though the communicative abundance of contemporary media might well bury many of the old regulatory clichés about scarcity, it will not bring about harmony of unrestricted sending and receiving of messages, and neither will it put an end to the old controversies about the mal-distribution of, and restricted access to the means of communication: questions of ‘who gets what, when and how’.

Thus, rather than celebrating all forms of multiplicity and choice, the radical-pluralist approach is best conceived as a critical orientation that seeks to ask, how plural, really, is the pluralism and abundance extolled today? As such, it departs from the political minimalism of liberal pluralism, for in contrast to the conventional view that sanctity of the individual 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). This can also be conceived as a bridge beyond the dead ends of identity politics and the impasse between culturalism and materialism of cultural studies and political economy respectively. In this way, an understanding of the democratic role of the media informed by radical pluralism would present an alternative to both the celebration of the proliferation of private media outlets as well as some of the more essentialist or outmoded views on the role of public broadcasting and public intervention in the media.

As Fraser (1992: 120) notes, it would be a mistake to separate cultural processes from structural inequalities, because the subordinated social groups are usually also lacking access to the material means of participation: ‘Political economy enforces structurally what culture accomplishes informally.’ Deliberating as if all people were equals – bracketing rather than eliminating structural inequalities – can thus in practice emphasize the effects of this inequality. While Mouffe has been criticized for avoiding the questions of institutional conditions for democracy and pluralism herself, I argue that we can still understand radical-pluralist critique, not as a postmodern celebration of spontaneous multiplicity, but also as a call for institutional restructuring and

macro-political concerns that pertain to the institutional structures and political economy of the media.

Democratic media policy would, accordingly, require breaking the hegemonic order by levelling the field by increasing participatory parity between unequal social groups. As Fraser (1992: 122) contends, one way of setting the question for radical politics is to ask: what institutional arrangements will best help narrow the gap in participatory parity between dominant and subordinate groups and create plurality of power structures that are maximally open to democratic contestation? In fact, the issues here are reminiscent of Garnham's (2003) argument that, 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. And, as he argues:

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, demonize the very common decision making, the politics, that must inevitably go with such resource distribution. (Garnham, 2003: 198)

Grasping the aspect of power and exclusion in all public spheres means that there is certain selectivity and exclusion inherent in all forms of public spheres. A realistic question is thus not whether there will be forms of power, regulation and exclusion in the future, but rather what form they should take, what values they are based on and how such decisions are arrived at. In other words, what is at stake is the struggle to establish the 'rules of the game'. However, for radical pluralists, these ethico-political rules will have been constructed on the basis of some constitutive exclusion so the rules of the game also need to be open to contestation (see Wenman, 2003: 62). It is in a similar sense that Keane has maintained that all media are basically institutions that unevenly distribute (cultural and material) entitlements to speak and to be heard and seen. Central to his view, then, is to show how the logic of the market itself also restricts freedoms within a society (see Keane, 1991: 118). Realistically, there is no media system that can exhaust the multitude of publics in a complex pluralist society and claim perfect impartiality, fairness or balance. Thus, while constructions like public-service broadcasting (or the market) cannot be defended as inherently impartial institutions that reconcile all interests and values in society, it does not mean that institutions like public-service broadcasting cannot be defended as spaces where the hegemonic values imposed by the market are contested.

Conclusion

While one of the implications of radical-pluralist perspectives for media policy is that it needs to be located within a broader context of democratic indeterminacy and contestation, it is particularly in the recognition of 'necessary exclusion' that I believe the critical promise of radical-pluralist perspectives

lies for the political economy of the media. There is a need to critically examine the rhetoric of pluralism and freedom and recognize them as not absolutes or neutral objectives, but as contingent and contested values, whose definitions, limits and evaluation criteria are all politically constructed. From the radical-pluralist perspective, the ideal of media pluralism need not be seen in terms of choice for consumers, perfect reflection of social differences or any other simplistic system of modelling the media after the existing social differences. It would not only be preoccupied with heterogeneity and diversification of options for choice as such, but on the structural relations of power that limit that 'choice'.

Pluralism in media politics is then best conceptualized in terms of the contestation of both hegemonic discourses and structures rather than as some kind of postmodern play of identity and difference. It is much in this sense that James Curran (2002: 236–7) argues that, rather than its traditional justification – that truth will somehow automatically arise from either free competition of ideas or open rational-critical debate – pluralism in the media should be conceived from the viewpoint of contestation that is open to different social groups to enter. One implication of this is that key requirement of genuine media pluralism is structural reform that levels the field and widens social access to public debate. The task of media policy, from this perspective, would be to support and enlarge the principled opportunities of structurally under-privileged actors, create room for the critical voices outside the systemic structures of the market or state bureaucracy, with principled aim of increasing the inclusiveness and openness of the public sphere to various forms of contestation – for which public-service broadcasting and other interventionist tools of media policy remain crucial.

The argument presented here is that the radical-pluralist perspective implies a rethinking of the traditional concepts and theoretical roots of media policy and regulation, not least those underlying public-service media, but not in the direction of shifting regulation more towards the market and celebrating the multiple sources of identification that it offers. Instead, I have argued that radical-pluralist perspectives can be conceived as theoretical approaches that, if anything, call for radicalizing the aims of democratic media policy.

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