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Mass Media and Democracy Revisited

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Introduction

New times call for new thinking. Countries in eastern Europe have redesigned their media systems, with one eye cocked to the west in search of new ideas and models (as well as investment). The domination of public service broadcasting in western Europe is weakening in response to a combined commercial and political onslaught. The rapid expansion of TV channels, and new communications technology, are also transforming the media landscape in a way that calls for an intellectual adjustment.

This chapter attempts therefore to do more than merely provide a textbook-style summary of the traditional liberal arguments about the democratic role of the media.² It also assesses their relevance for today. Much liberal commentary derives from a period when the 'media' consisted principally of small-circulation, political publications, and the state was still dominated by a small, landed elite. The result is a legacy of old saws which bear little relationship to contemporary reality but which continue to be repeated uncritically as if nothing has changed. It is time that they were given a decent funeral.

Discussion of the democratic role of the media is bound up with a debate about how the media should be organized. Traditional liberal conceptions were framed partly in order to legitimate the 'deregulation' of the press, and its full establishment on free market lines (Curran, 1978). Calling into question traditionalist thought thus casts doubt on the free market programme that it was intended to legitimate. However, the process of going back to first principles and reappraising the democratic role of the media also raises questions about the adequacy of conventional public service alternatives to the market.

This reappraisal concludes with a revised conception of the democratic role of the media, and a proposal for a new way of organizing the media. These may well be rejected in favour of better considered alternatives. Whatever view is taken, one thing is clear. The literature on media and democracy needs

a removal van to carry away unwanted lumber accumulated over centuries. What should be removed, what should take its place, and how the intellectual furniture should be rearranged is something that needs to be critically addressed.

Habermas and the Public Sphere

A good starting-point for rethinking the democratic role of the media is provided by a seminal study by Jürgen Habermas (1989), which has acquired almost a cult following in the USA and northern Europe following its belated translation.³ In brief, Habermas argues that the development of early modern capitalism brought into being an autonomous arena of public debate. The economic independence provided by private property, the critical reflection fostered by letters and novels, the flowering of discussion in coffee houses and salons and, above all, the emergence of an independent, market-based press, created a new public engaged in critical political discussion. From this was forged a reason-based consensus which shaped the direction of the state.

Habermas traces the evolution of the 'bourgeois public sphere' – a public space between the private domain and the state in which public opinion was formed and 'popular' supervision of government was established – from the seventeenth century through to the first half of the nineteenth century. Thereafter, he argues, the public sphere came to be dominated by an expanded state and organized economic interests. A new corporatist pattern of power relations was established in which organized interests bargained with each other and with the state, while increasingly excluding the public. The media ceased to be an agency of empowerment and rationality, and became a further means by which the public was sidelined. Instead of providing a conduit for rational-critical debate, the media manipulated mass opinion. It defined politics as a spectacle, offered predigested, convenience thinking and conditioned the public in the role of passive consumers.

Although Habermas was careful to argue that participation in the public sphere, in its classical phase, was restricted to the propertied class, he has come under attack for idealizing this period of history (Mortensen, 1977; Hohendahl, 1979; Curran, 1991; Eley, 1992; Schudson, 1992). He has also been criticized for his characterization of the media and the public sphere in the subsequent period (Fraser, 1987; Dahlgren, 1991; Garnham, 1992).⁴ There are, perhaps, good grounds for questioning the value of Habermas's study as historical scholarship. It offers nevertheless a powerful and arresting vision of the role of the media in a democratic society, and in this sense its historical status is irrelevant. From it can be extrapolated a model of a public sphere as a neutral zone where access to relevant information affecting the public good is widely available, where discussion is free of domination and where all those participating in public debate do so on an equal basis. Within this public sphere, people collectively determine through the processes of rational argument the way in which they want to see society develop, and this shapes in turn the conduct of government policy. The media facilitates this process by

providing an arena of public debate, and by reconstituting private citizens as a public body in the form of public opinion.

The lingering question left by Habermas is how can this model – supposedly realized by a restricted class (of mostly men) in the early nineteenth century – be universalized during the era of mass politics. In a highly differentiated, organized capitalist society? The answer, it will be argued, is that the public sphere cannot be re-established through a simple process of enlargement, by enabling those who have been excluded to participate in it. Rather, the public sphere and the role of the media in relation to it has to be reconceptualized and reincarnated in a new form.

First, however, we will consider more conventional accounts of the democratic role of the media. This will focus on the three key concepts in the liberal canon – the media as public watchdog, public representative ('fourth estate') and source of public information. These will be sceptically assessed before setting out an alternative conception of the media's democratic role, and alternative blueprint of how this might be realized.

Media Watchdog

Classical liberal thought argues that the primary democratic role of the media is to act as a public watchdog overseeing the state. This is usually defined as revealing abuses in the exercise of state authority, although it is sometimes extended to include facilitating a general debate about the functioning of government.

This watchdog role is said to override in importance all other functions of the media, and to dictate the form in which the media should be organized. Only by anchoring the media to the free market is it possible to ensure the media's complete independence from government. Once the media becomes subject to public regulation, it will lose its bite as a watchdog and may even be transformed into a snarling Rottweiler in the service of the state.

This particular view seems to have become the cornerstone of a new consensus in the USA. For instance Kelley and Donway, two American political scientists of conservative sympathies, argue that any reform of the media, however desirable, is unacceptable if it is 'at the cost of the watchdog function. And this is the inevitable cost. A press that is licensed, franchised or regulated is subject to political pressures when it deals with issues affecting the interests of those in power' (Kelley and Donway, 1990: 97). This argument is restated in a different form by a political scientist of centrist views, Stephen Holmes: 'Doesn't every regulation converting the media into a "neutral forum" lessen its capacity to act as a partisan gadfly, investigating and criticizing government in an aggressive way?' (Holmes, 1990: 51). Even commentators with strongly reformist views appear to entertain the same fears. 'I cannot envision any kind of content regulation, however indirect', writes the media critic, Carl Stepp, 'that wouldn't project government into the position of favouring or disfavours some views and information over others. Even so-called structural steps aimed at opening channels for freer expression

would post government in the intolerable role of super-gatekeeper' (Stepp, 1990: 194).

These arguments paved the way for the increasing deregulation of American broadcasting. Television channels in the United States were 'freed' from the obligation to provide a mixed schedule of programmes and from the fairness doctrine requiring public affairs to be reported from contrasting viewpoints. Rules restricting chain-ownership of TV stations were relaxed, and the requirement on cable TV companies to carry over-the-air channels has been dropped. Even the principle of licence renewal of broadcasting stations, the coping-stone of what residual regulation remains, is being questioned.

What happened in the USA has begun to happen in Britain, though in the latter case in the teeth of considerable opposition. As in the USA, it was argued with great force that public regulation of broadcasting inhibits critical surveillance of government (Adam Smith Institute, 1984; Veljanovski, 1989). As Rupert Murdoch (1989: 9) succinctly put it, 'public service broadcasters in this country [Britain] have paid a price for their state-sponsored privileges. That price has been their freedom.' These and similar arguments contributed to the introduction of the 1990 Broadcasting Act which authorized the auctioning of TV and radio franchises (with some quality safeguards), the expansion of the private broadcasting sector and the relaxation of content controls on commercial TV and radio. But the basic infrastructure of public service broadcasting – the BBC and regulatory agencies enforcing public duties on private broadcasters – survived intact due to continuing political and public support for public service broadcasting in Britain (Curran and Seaton, 1996).

However, the free-market/public-watchdog argument has a powerful resonance in Britain, as in the USA, because it is a key element of the ideology that legitimates the printed press in both countries. Indeed, it is regularly invoked and accepted as the grounds for opposing any additional regulation. The Supreme Court in the USA even struck down in 1974 a press right-of-reply law in Florida on the grounds that it would inhibit criticism of public officials, chill robust political debate and infringe the publisher's freedom of expression upheld by the First Amendment (Barron, 1975). Similarly, the last Royal Commission on the Press in Britain opposed any form of selective newspaper subsidy because 'it would involve in an obvious way the dangers of government interference in the press'. 'No public body', it added, 'should ever be put in a position of discriminating like a censor between one applicant and another' since it could lead to state intimidation (Royal Commission on the Press, 1977: 126).

Yet these arguments flatly contradict precepts that have been central, historically, to the organization of broadcasting in both Britain and the USA. Even now, the Independent Television Commission in Britain has freedom to choose 'like a censor between one applicant and another' in awarding a franchise (a freedom which it has used), and is not bound by the highest bid. The right of reply to partisan attack was also authorized for a time in American broadcasting, ironically with the support of the Supreme Court, even though this was outlawed in the American press (Lichtenberg, 1991).

For a long time, this inconsistency was reluctantly accepted by free market

advocates on the grounds that broadcasting was a technically disabled medium (Royal Commission on the Press, 1977: 9; cf. Horwitz, 1991). The received wisdom was that television and radio were limited by the scarcity of frequencies on the electro-magnetic spectrum, and had to be run consequently in the public interest or, as it was argued in the USA, managed in a way that accommodated the interests of those who had not been awarded a franchise. This made them different from the press, it was reasoned, since the number of press titles was not subject to physical constraint.

This pragmatic justification for public service broadcasting crumbled in the 1980s with the diffusion of new TV technology (Pool, 1983). By 1995, most people in Britain and the USA had access, or potential access, to more television channels than newspaper titles. A similar trend occurred in many other countries. The door to broadcasting deregulation swung invitingly open throughout much of the western world.

Private Watchdogs: Rhetoric and Reality

The traditional public-watchdog definition of the media, in the context of an expanding broadcasting system, thus has a seemingly compelling logic. It legitimates the case for free market reform of broadcasting, while justifying the continued, unfettered capitalist organization of the press. There seems to be, at first glance, much to commend this approach. Critical surveillance of government is clearly an important aspect of the democratic functioning of the media. In the USA, exposure of the Watergate cover-up during the Nixon presidency or lesser-known exploits (outside their country) such as disclosure of state involvement in the illegal sale of Bofors guns in Sweden or Nikiforov's exposure of local state corruption in the USSR, leading to his murder in 1989, are all heroic examples of the way in which the media performed a public service by investigating and stopping malpractice by public officials.⁵

While the watchdog role of the media is important, however, it is perhaps quixotic to argue that it should be paramount. This conventional view derives from a period when the principal 'media' were highly politicized, small-circulation newspapers, whereas most contemporary media are given over mainly to entertainment. Even in the case of so-called news media, news coverage generally accounts for only a small part of their total content,⁶ and only a proportion of this news is devoted to critical scrutiny of the state. In effect, the received wisdom means defining the role of the media in terms of what it does *not* do most of the time.

The traditional approach appears time-worn in another way. It defines the watchdog role of the media as applying only to the state. This antiquated formulation derives from a period when the state was unrepresentative, corrupt and potentially despotic, and free speech and a free press were viewed as a vital defence against the imminent threat of state absolutism (e.g. Cato, 1720). This analysis came to be framed by a simplistic conception of society in which conflict was thought to exist primarily between the individual and the state, and between ignorance and enlightenment (Curran, 1978). This ignored the exercise of power through structures other than the

state, and so paid no attention to the role of the press as a defence against exploitation in the private sphere – most notably in the home and the economy. Clearly, a broader definition of the watchdog role is needed. The media should be seen as a source of redress against the abuse of all forms of power over others.

However, as soon as this broader definition is adopted, it weakens the case for the free market since market-based media are not generally independent of all structures of power, both private and public. Indeed, as a consequence of the take-over boom of the last three decades, a large number of media enterprises are now tied to core sectors of finance and industrial capital. For example, during the period between 1969 and 1986, nine multinational conglomerates bought over 200 newspapers and magazines in Britain with a total circulation of 46 million at the time of purchase (excluding publications resold to each other) (Curran and Seaton, 1996). Similarly, much of the press in the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, France, Canada and Sweden – to mention only those countries for which evidence is readily to hand – have been bought by or have major shareholdings in non-publishing corporations (Mayer, 1993; Bagdikian, 1992; Chadwick, 1989; Farnsworth, 1989; Tunstall and Palmer, 1991; Lorimer and McNulty, 1991; Hadenius and Weibull, 1986). The trend towards deregulation has also resulted in television becoming increasingly embedded in the corporate structure of big business. Diversified conglomerates dominate the new TV industries based in Europe, and control commercial television in Australia (Sanchez-Taberner et al., 1993; Tunstall and Palmer, 1991; Chadwick, 1989). A similar trend is developing in the USA (Bagdikian, 1992). For example, in 1990 Japan's Matsushita Electric Industrial Company acquired MCA, a major Hollywood producer of TV programmes, following the pattern set by General Electric's acquisition of the US network, NBC, in 1986.

One of the consequences of this changing pattern of ownership is that media enterprises have sometimes refrained from investigating critically the activities of the giant conglomerates to which they belong (Hollingsworth, 1986; Bagdikian, 1992; Curran and Seaton, 1996). In exceptional cases, parent companies have even stepped in to suppress criticism of their interests. Thus Toshiba, one of Japan's leading nuclear contractors, withdrew in 1988 a record attacking Japan's nuclear programme which had been commissioned by its Toshiba-EMI music subsidiary (Murdoch, 1990). The free market compromises rather than guarantees the editorial integrity of commercial media, and impairs in particular its oversight of private corporate power.

More importantly, changes in the ownership of the media have affected their relationship to government. One 'school' of researchers argues that media conglomerates are, in effect, independent power centres which use their political leverage to pursue corporate gain. Thus Chadwick (1989) argues in an important study that a number of entrepreneurs formed a tactical alliance with the Labour government in Australia in the late 1980s as a way of securing official permission to consolidate their control over Australia's commercial TV and press. This resulted in an unprecedented number of editorial endorsements for the Labour party in the 1987 election, as well as opportunistic fence-sitting by some traditionally anti-Labour papers. Similarly, Bagdikian also claims that media conglomerates turned a blind eye to

official corruption and failed programmes during the Reagan era in order 'to protect a political ally' (Bagdikian, 1990: X). In a more detailed analysis, Tunstall and Palmer (1991) argue that the policy of major media combines in Europe can be explained partly in terms of their pursuit of 'regulatory favours' (by which they mean principally the abolition or waiving of official media regulation). By implication, media conglomerates are not independent watchdogs serving the public interest but self-seeking, corporate mercenaries using their muscle to promote private interests.

Another political economy tradition argues that the transformation of media ownership is part of the emergence of an information-cultural complex with close ties to government (Schiller, 1989; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). The stress here is less on the individual interactions between media corporations and government, and more on the way in which the integration of the media into capitalism has encouraged it to endorse, sometimes critically, discourses supportive of capital. As one notable study argues, 'it is because of the control of media institutions by multinational capital (big business) that the media have been biased towards conservatism, thus furthering what they perceive as their own economic interests' (Kellner, 1990: 172). This approach contains a number of internal variations – some more persuasive than others⁷ – and rarely confronts directly the liberal conception of the media as a public watchdog. But the thrust of this research, whether explicit or implicit, is that conglomerate media are not a source of popular control over government but merely one means by which dominant economic forces seek to exercise informal influence over the state.

Critical scrutiny of government can also be blunted by political partisanship. In free market theory, partisanship on the right is balanced by partisanship on the left so that there is always a substantial press ready to expose government failure, whichever party is in office. This theory begins to break down when parties of the right are in government and the press, as in most of Europe, is overwhelmingly right-wing. Although conflicts can occur between right-wing papers and right-wing governments, the tendency is for criticism to be reined in out of partisan and patriotic loyalty. In extreme cases, this can result almost in the suspension of critical judgement. The intrepid watchdog tradition did not find in Lord Matthews, for instance, a notable exponent. 'I would find myself in a dilemma', he declared, 'about whether to report a British Watergate affair because of the national harm. I believe in battling for Britain' (cit. Hollingsworth, 1986: 31). At that time, Lord Matthews controlled the third largest press group in Britain.

The assumption at the heart of traditional theory that the free market nurtures fearless newshounds is thus open to question. This said, radical accounts that stress the 'incorporation' of commercial media by big business also need to be viewed critically. Their emphasis on the material transformation of the media is not always balanced by an analysis of countervailing influences within media organizations that make for relative journalistic independence. In reality, the need for audience credibility and political legitimacy, the self-image and professional commitments of journalists, and normative public support for journalistic independence are all important influences militating against the subordination of commercial media to the business and political interests of parent companies. This is well illustrated by

the extraordinary battle that took place in the *Observer*, a British Sunday newspaper, owned by the multinational conglomerate, Lornho.

In April 1984, Lornho's chief executive, Tiny Rowland, told the *Observer* editor, Donald Trefford, not to run a story about atrocities committed by the Zimbabwe army in the dissident Matabele province. Publication of the report threatened to damage Lornho's already strained relationship with the government in a country that contributed some £15 million to group profits. Donald Trefford defied his proprietor and published the story. He was backed unanimously by his staff, and by the paper's independent directors who had been appointed at the time of Lornho's takeover of the *Observer*. In the protracted row that followed (in which Lornho allegedly cancelled advertising in its own paper), Trefford offered to stand down. This put the proprietor in a difficult position. To accept Trefford's resignation would undermine the credibility of the paper, while to refuse would entrench the editor's position. For a time, Rowland toyed with the idea of selling the paper. In the end, he settled for a face-saving exchange of letters and confirmed Trefford's appointment. The sanction of publicity in effect prevented a powerful conglomerate from manipulating a subsidiary company. However, it did not prevent Lornho from exerting pressure on the *Observer* on subsequent occasions, when senior editorial resistance was not always so determined (Curran and Seaton, 1996).

Public Watchdogs: A Reassessment

Public service broadcasting organizations have also resisted editorial interference from governments for much the same reasons. Their audience credibility and strategic long-term interest, and the self-conception and self-respect of their journalists, have all encouraged a defence of their autonomy. There is also in many liberal democracies general support within the political elite for the principle of broadcasting independence, partly for reasons of self-interest. Ministers know that one day they will need access to broadcasting when they are voted out of office. Some broadcasting organizations are also difficult to capture because power within them is decentralized or because they are protected by an internal system of checks and balances. But the ultimate defence of public service broadcasting autonomy is public support. On a number of occasions, in countries ranging from Germany and Britain to Israel and Australia, public disapproval has stopped politicians from asserting increased political control over broadcasting in a way that directly parallels the saga at the *Observer*.⁸

Indeed, recent British experience points to a perplexing conclusion that both partly supports and partly refutes the arguments advanced by free market traditionalists. On the one hand, British broadcasting lost some of its autonomy during the 1980s due to a sustained onslaught on its independence by a radical right-wing government headed by Margaret Thatcher (Barnett and Curry, 1994; Cockerell, 1989; Leapman, 1987; Schlesinger et al., 1983). Yet, despite this, it continued to expose government to more sustained, critical scrutiny than the predominantly right-wing national press which for much of the 1980s was strongly committed to the aims and objectives of the

Thatcher administration. While there was escalating conflict between broadcasters and government, the relationship between most of the national press and government during the Thatcherite era was, despite occasional spats, remarkably harmonious.⁹

This contrast is illustrated by the furore over an ITV documentary, *Death on the Rock*, which suggested that a British army SAS unit had unlawfully killed members of the IRA in Gibraltar, and that this was being concealed in the official version of events. The Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, asked the commercial television regulatory authority, the IBA, to prevent the transmission of the programme on the grounds that it would prejudice the official inquest that was due to take place. The IBA refused, and the programme was transmitted on 28 April 1988. The Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher, was reported to have feelings about the programme that ran 'much deeper than being furious', and her displeasure was echoed in much of the press. 'TV Slur on the SAS' was the *Daily Star's* headline (29 April 1988). 'Fury Over SAS "Trial by TV"', reported the *Daily Mail* (29 April), which also published a TV review calling the programme 'a woefully one-sided look at the killings'. The *Sunday Times* ran several articles which impugned the reliability of the programme's main witness, and cast doubt on the programme's claims.

This public flak failed to intimidate. Thames Television, the makers of the programme, convened an enquiry headed by Lord Windlesham (a former Conservative Northern Ireland Minister) which concluded that, 'taken as a whole "Death on the Rock" did not offend against the due impartiality requirement of the IBA and the Broadcasting Act 1981'. Although making some criticisms, this internal report hailed the programme as 'trenchant' and its makers as 'painstaking and persistent' (Windlesham and Rampton, 1989: 143). The programme duly won several prizes including the BAFTA award, the TV industry's top prize, which symbolically affirmed the broadcasting community's rejection of government and Conservative newspaper criticisms. As a final snub, the programme was screened again in May 1991 as part of a celebratory season to mark the 35th anniversary of the investigative TV programme series, *This Week*, in which 'Death On the Rock' had first appeared. This incident reveals the way in which a complex reality can deviate from the script written by traditionalist ideologues. State-linked watchdogs can bark, while private watchdogs sleep.

Yet, often, both can remain somnolent. While the vigilance of the press can be blunted by the economic interests and partisan loyalties of its controllers, the vigilance of public service broadcasting can be undermined by covert pressure from governments. Public service broadcasting offers a number of levers that can be manipulated by politicians (Kuhn, 1995; Blumler, 1992; Ostergaard, 1992; Browne, 1989; Eziomi-Halevy, 1987). Broadcasting authorities can be 'packed' with government supporters; financial pressure can be exerted by a refusal to increase public funding; public flak can be generated in an attempt to drive a wedge between broadcasters and the public; informal and formal representations can be made to promote self-censorship; and, most effective of all, the future of broadcasting organizations can be threatened through legislative reorganization. These different sanctions have acquired a sharper edge as a consequence of rising broadcasting costs, increased TV

competition and the legitimization of political opposition to public service broadcasting.

However, threats to the autonomy of private and public media tend not to be evenly balanced because they do not usually encounter the same degree of resistance. Circumstances vary, of course, between different societies and at different points in time. In general, however, the independent watchdog role of the media is more liable to be subverted in the deregulated than in the regulated sector, in liberal democracies with mature public broadcasting systems. Owners of private media have greater legitimacy within their organizations than do government ministers seeking to influence public service broadcasting organizations. They are less likely to encounter obstruction when seeking to assert control, whereas government ministers are hedged in by checks and balances in autonomous broadcasting systems developed in order to prevent their interference. Public concern about the manipulation of private media is also less well developed than it is in relation to public media, and so provides a less adequate form of protection.

Settling of Accounts

For the sake of clarity, it may be helpful to bring together the different threads of the argument that is being advanced. The acclaimed public watchdog role of the media does not legitimate, as some neo-liberals proclaim, a free market media system. This is partly because the public-watchdog role — although important — cannot plausibly be said to characterize the functioning of most contemporary mass communications since these are given over largely to entertainment. More importantly, the traditional liberal argument is based on two false premises. One is that the state is the main threat to the welfare of society, whereas in reality exploitation and oppression emanate from a variety of different agencies in society. The second fallacy is that the media become 'independent' by being independent of the state. This ignores the way in which private media are increasingly linked through private ownership to corporate structures of power in a form that compromises their independence, and impairs their critical surveillance on behalf of the public.

To this can be added the further objection that much discussion is bedevilled by system-logic, by assertions that pay little attention to the empirical sociology of the media. There are in fact countervailing influences in both public and private media that can prevent their subordination to the state or private interests. These countervailing influences are highly developed in some public broadcasting systems. They are much less developed in the unregulated private sector.

In short, the complex issues raised by the public-watchdog functioning of the media cannot be resolved by a simple, unthinking, catechistic subscription to the free market. What is needed are practical measures which will strengthen the critical vigilance of the media rather than a complacent endorsement of one system.

Consumer Representation

The public-watchdog perspective is essentially negative and defensive. It usually defines the role of the media in terms of monitoring government, protecting the public, preventing those with power from overstepping the mark. It thus stops short of the more positive, Habermasian conception of the media as an instrument of the popular will.

However, there is one strand within traditional liberal thought with affinities to Habermas's approach. This defines the role of the media as that of the 'fourth estate'. Some Victorian commentators argued that newspapers were subject to the equivalent of an election every time they went on sale, in contrast to politicians who were elected only infrequently (Boyce, 1978). Consequently, they claimed, the press was a fully representative institution, and should be accepted as a partner in the process of government. As Thomas Carlyle argued, the press should be deemed 'a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making' derived from the will of the people (Carlyle, 1907: 164).

This argument was reformulated in the twentieth century in less assertive terms around the concept of the sovereign consumer. The core premise is that 'the broad shape and nature of the press is ultimately determined by no one but its readers' due to the hidden hand of the free market (Whale, 1977: 85). Media-owners in a market-based system must give people what they want if they are to stay in business, and this ensures that the media as a whole reflect the views and values of the buying public and act as a public mouthpiece.

This particular argument has been given mythological force in traditional histories of the press (e.g. Siebert et al., 1956). In the case of Britain, the received account is that the press progressed through three main stages (Christie, 1970; Aspinall, 1973; Koss, 1981, 1984). In the first phase, it was subject to state censorship and functioned almost as an extension of the state. In the second stage, it was dominated by the political parties and served as an extension of the party system. In the third and final stage (dating from the 1940s), the press came to be managed by market-led pragmatists who sought to maximize sales rather than further a political viewpoint. This allegedly established the consumer as the ultimate controller of the press, and transformed newspapers into representatives of the public rather than of organized political interests.

A sophisticated variation of the consumer representation thesis is to be found also in critical, revisionist American sociology. As exemplified by Alvin Gouldner (1976), it acknowledges weaknesses in the traditional free market argument but nonetheless endorses its central conclusion. Gouldner draws attention to the existence of 'huge, immensely capitalised and increasingly centralised media' and argues that, in general, 'ownership generates a set of limits patterning the media in directions supportive of the property system'. Yet he goes on to make a stark distinction between the market-based media system which he views as ultimately liberating, and public ownership of the media which he equates with the Soviet model and 'a catastrophic regression of rationality'. The grounds for making this manichean distinction are two-fold: public ownership leads, in his view, to the fusion of official and

media definitions of reality, whereas the market liberates the media even from those who run it. The mainspring of this liberation is supposedly the drive to make a profit. It can propel 'leading publishers to tolerate (and promote) a counter-culture hostile to their own long-term property interests . . . They will and have sold an adversary culture that openly alienates masses of youth from their parents and government because, and so long as, it is profitable'. There is thus, according to Gouldner, 'the essential bourgeois contradiction between producing anything that sells, on the one side, and allowing only what is supportive of existing institutions, on the other'. This is resolved in favour of short-term gain so that 'in the end, the system subverts itself because there exists no protection for its own *future* that might rule out quick turnover profits at the cost of the system as a whole' (Gouldner, 1976: 157).

There is thus a solid corpus of literature, written by people from different disciplines and from different theoretical perspectives, which advances essentially the same argument: the free market produces a media system which responds to and expresses the views of the people. Like all persuasive mythologies, it contains an element of truth. Its overall conclusion is nonetheless profoundly misleading – for at least six different reasons.

Firstly, market dominance by oligopolies has reduced media diversity, audience choice and public control. In most western countries, there has been a long-term reduction in the number of competing newspapers, and an increase in local monopoly and chain ownership (Hoyer, Hadenius and Weibull, 1975; Rosse, 1980; Curran and Seaton, 1996). This has been paralleled by a long-term consolidation of centralized control of magazine, record, book, and film production (Locksley and Garnham, 1988; Garnham, 1990; Murdoch, 1990; Bagdikian, 1992; Sanchez-Taberner et al., 1993). The picture in the case of TV is more mixed because oligopolistic control of commercial TV has been prevented or mitigated in some countries by regulatory controls.

The scale of this oligopolistic domination of the media can be illustrated by the experience of Australia, Britain and the USA. In Australia, two men (Packer and Murdoch) controlled, in 1989, 84 per cent of the sales of the thirty best selling magazines; Murdoch controlled in 1988 a remarkable 63 per cent of metropolitan daily circulation, 59 per cent of Sunday circulation and 55 per cent of suburban local circulation; and three entrepreneurs dominated the commercial TV market (Chadwick, 1989). In Britain, the top five companies in each media sector controlled, in the mid-1980s, 93 per cent of national newspaper sales, 66 per cent of video rentals, 59 per cent of record, cassette and CD sales, 53 per cent of local evening newspaper sales, 45 per cent of ITV transmissions, and 40 per cent of book sales (Curran and Seaton, 1991). In the USA, four companies control about two-thirds of the TV market; three publishers dominate the national news magazine market; and most of the local press is controlled by chains (Bagdikian, 1992; Hoynes, 1994).

Free market apologists emphasize two things in relation to these trends. They point out correctly that the movement towards market domination by a few corporations in certain markets has not been continuous and uninterrupted (Royal Commission on the Press, 1977; Burnett and Weber, 1988). Some also point to the expansion of part of the media system and argue that this is

reviving competition. The growth of specialized magazines, computerized newsletters, desktop publishing, local radio stations, on-line services and, above all, TV channels are all cited as evidence of endogenous market regeneration (Pool, 1983; Compaine, 1985; Dahlgren, 1991).

These are important qualifications: but what they overlook is three powerful countervailing and interrelated trends that are resulting in increasing domination of the media as a whole in a national context, and increasing market power in an international context. Since 1960, there has been a rapid acceleration of mergers and acquisitions of corporations in different media sectors, producing major multimedia combines. The general trend towards privatization of broadcasting, and the growth of the new TV industries, has also enabled media conglomerates to expand into a sector where their growth had been curtailed previously. There has also been a further shift towards the integration of the global market in TV programmes, books and business information (following trends already well established in the film and music sectors), which has enabled some companies to extend their market reach.

These trends have coalesced to produce private concentrations of media power that are unprecedented. The most far-flung is Murdoch's News Corporation which controls a newspaper empire stretching east-west from Boston to Budapest and north-south from London to Queensland, an extended magazine and book empire incorporating Harper Collins, and a TV and film empire including Fox TV and Twentieth Century Fox in the USA, British Sky Broadcasting in northern Europe, and Star TV in Asia. To this has been added joint ventures with Telstra, the Australian telecommunications company and MCI, the second largest, long-distance telephone operator in the US, for the development of on-line and interactive services. Major European based conglomerates include the Bertelsmann group which has a massive book-TV-film-radio-magazine empire in Germany, including both the RTL Plus television channel and Germany's largest cable TV company, in addition to the American book and record majors, Bantam and RCA, amongst other foreign media interests; and Berlusconi's Fininvest group which controls the three main commercial TV channels, and extensive film and press interests, in Italy in addition to television holdings in Germany (Telefunf), Spain (Telecinco) and Canada. These are matched by major conglomerates like Time-Warner, International Thompson and Sony based respectively in the USA, Canada and Japan. The enormous resources commanded by these conglomerates, their large economies of scale, and extensive domination of linked markets, has undermined the functioning of the market as a free and open contest, a level playing field in which all participants have an equal chance of success.

The second, related flaw in the consumer representation thesis is that the rising capitalization of the media industries has restricted entry into the market. In Britain, for example, it currently costs over £20 million to establish a new national daily newspaper, over £30 million to establish a new cable TV station, and over £500 million to establish a new satellite TV business. It is still possible to enter more cheaply the marginal media sectors – such as local free sheets, local radio stations and specialist magazines – but these have much less influence by comparison with the commanding heights of the communications industry. It is also possible to attempt to launch into the

main deregulated media sectors with a relatively small capital outlay, and even to maintain a nominal presence by operating on a very small budget with manageable losses. But low investment often leads to low quality and high price, a combination that usually marginalizes these ventures from the outset.

The heavy capitalization of the media industry has created, in effect, a zone of influence in which dominant economic forces have a privileged position, and to which other significant social forces are denied direct, unmediated access. As Nicholas Garnham comments: 'we would find it strange now if we made voting rights dependent upon purchasing power or property rights and yet access to the mass media, as both channels of information and fora of debate, is largely controlled by just such power and property rights' (Garnham, 1986: 47).

It is in this context that free market celebration of the recent expansion of some media sectors needs to be assessed critically. The belief is that more media outlets has produced more diversity and choice. What this increasingly fashionable argument ignores, however, is that prevailing market structures constrain and impose limits on the 'diversity' generated by expansion. More need not necessarily mean more of the same, as some left-wing critics maintain. What it does mean is that choice is always *pre-structured* by the conditions of competition. In a contemporary context, this often means a class filter imposed through the high costs of market entry; an unequal relationship between large and small competitors; oligopolistic market domination; and the constraints imposed by catering for the mass market. The consequences of this prestructuring can be briefly illuminated by recent changes in American television and the British press.

In the USA, a large increase in the number of TV channels has expanded cultural and genre diversity. The basic diet of the networks has been expanded by counter-programming, independent stations and, above all, by cable TV stations to make available a choice between cops and robber series, sitcoms, chat shows, game shows, soaps, classic comedy TV shows, stand-up comics, Hollywood film classics, art house movies from Europe, newswish American films, children's cartoons, foreign-language programmes for ethnic minorities, and much more besides. But what it has failed to achieve is a corresponding increase in the ideological diversity of public affairs programming. The burgeoning number of local independent stations provides, according to Entman's pioneering research, 'little political information, let alone accountability news' (Entman, 1989: 116). CNN has also introduced two new news channels, which provide instantaneous coverage within much the same ideological framework as the three news networks (CBS, NBC and ABC). What none of the new commercial enterprises has done is to offer a leftist 'take' on the news. Indeed, the greatest political diversity is to be found significantly in the current affairs output of PBS and a relative newcomer, C-Span, both non-profit organizations outside the economic market, which are undercapitalized and marginalized.

Similarly, the recent expansion of the British national press has led to more consumer choice without expanding substantially its ideological range. The introduction of cost-cutting new technology led to the launch of eight new national papers between 1986 and 1990. However, market leaders forced up costs by increasing paging and promotion in a deliberate attempt to squeeze

out competition. In the event, only five new nationals survived into the 1990s.¹⁰ Of these, the majority continued to make a loss, and not one was aligned to the left. The chasm between editorial and public opinion in Britain persisted. In the 1992 general election, the Conservative party gained the support of 70 per cent of national daily circulation but only 42 per cent of the vote.

In short, distortions in the market require the media representation thesis to be heavily qualified. When this thesis was first advanced, it had considerably more validity than it has now. It really was the case in the pre-industrial phase of the press that a wide spectrum of individuals or social groups could set up, so to speak, their trestle table in the free market place of ideas. This produced a choice between ideologically diverse papers - conditions in which the 'public' could exercise significant influence over the press and be represented by it (Curran, 1977). This has long ceased to be the case even if traditional free market arguments continue to be advanced as if nothing has changed.

The third flaw in the consumer representation thesis is that it ignores the way in which the relationship between media and audiences has been transformed since the nineteenth century. The audiences for 'popular' media have become much larger and also more heterogeneous in terms of their political and social composition: they no longer necessarily have a shared set of beliefs or common interest that can be 'represented'. The rise of entertainment content in news media has also reduced the desire for political reinforcement as a motivation for media consumption. A view of the media, formed during a period when politicized newspapers served highly differentiated audiences, no longer corresponds to the reality of the contemporary media. The *Sun*, the biggest selling daily in Britain, illustrates the change that has taken place. It devotes less than 15 per cent of its editorial content to public affairs news and comment, and sells to a politically divided audience of over 10 million readers. While it can be argued plausibly that the *Sun* connects to structures of feeling among its readers (Holland, 1983), it certainly does not represent them in a political sense. Thus only a minority of its readers voted Conservative in the 1987 and 1992 general elections - the choice insistently advocated by the paper (Harrop, 1988; MacArthur, 1992).

Fourthly, the revisionist claim that media controllers subordinate their ideological commitments to the imperatives of the market is only partly true. It is based on selective arguments that simplify and misrepresent a complex situation. Thus, it is claimed that the dispersal of share ownership is producing a divorce between ownership and control of the media; that the new breed of media controllers are market-led pragmatists; and that the media, in a competitive environment, must submit to the rule of the consumer. In fact, a large number of communications conglomerates - including very large and extended ones - are still controlled by a single shareholder or family (Sanchez-Taberner et al., 1993; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). A significant number of media controllers are ideologically committed rather than politically neutral businessmen (Curran and Seaton, 1996; Frenkel, 1994; Tunstall and Palmer, 1991). Above all, the rise of entertainment and the growth of oligopoly has increased the relative political autonomy of media owners in relation to the market.

All three points are illustrated by Rupert Murdoch's career (Munster, 1985;

media as self?
equipment - opinion?

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Leapman, 1987; Shawcross, 1993). He has generally controlled the media enterprises he has invested in; his views have become increasingly right-wing, particularly since the early 1970s; and, in advancing his beliefs, he has skillfully negotiated the currents of the market rather than being swept passively along by them. Thus, on occasion, he has bowed to strong market signals: he refrained, for example, from changing the character of the radical New York magazine, *Village Voice*. At other times, he has trimmed when it has seemed advantageous to do so: the *Victoria Star* and the New South Wales *Herald* both backed the right-wing Labour leader, Bob Hawke, in the 1987 election when it was in Murdoch's corporate interest to allow editorial flexibility. He also bent prudently to the wind when new technology facilitated the emergence of a new competitor, the London *Independent*: his appointment of an independently minded Conservative journalist, Simon Jenkins, as editor of the *Times* in 1990 was a belated recognition that the *Times*'s Thatcherite politics was causing it to lose readers to the new paper. Yet, whenever possible, he has pushed his papers to the right by hand-picking editors with right-wing views and by bombarding inherited or caretaker editors with aggressively worded right-wing advice (Evans, 1983; Giles, 1986). Indeed what has been most striking about these displays of ideological commitment has been his willingness to move some of his papers — such as the London *Sun*, *Sunday Times* and *Times* — to the radical right in opposition to the views of the majority of its readers (Curran and Seaton, 1996). To see Murdoch as a passive absorbent of market dictates is to adopt too mechanistic and simplistic a view of the market; it also underestimates Murdoch's ability and the strength of his convictions.

Fifthly, the concept of sovereign consumer control ignores the variety of influences which shape media content. The familiar image of the trader in the market-place of ideas, which regularly recurs in free market rhetoric, ignores the reality of highly bureaucratized media organizations, with fixed routines and structures, whose journalists rely heavily on a restricted range of sources. It simply overlooks, in other words, the voluminous sociological literature which shows the varied ways in which audience pressures are selectively interpreted, 'refracted' and even resisted within media organizations.¹¹

Sixthly, the idealized notion of market democracy ignores the central financial role of advertising in commercial broadcasting and the press. Critics of advertising tend to focus on the direct editorial influence exerted by advertisers through the withholding of advertising support for ideological reasons, and the pressure that this generates on media clients to accommodate to or anticipate advertisers' ideological concerns (Hoch, 1974; Barnouw, 1978; Bagdikian, 1992). The extent of this influence varies considerably between different media, and is often strongly resisted by editorial staff (Curran, 1986). Arguably, the more important way in which advertisers shape the media is through more indirect processes. The structure of the press is oriented more towards upscale than downscale audiences because the former generates a larger advertising subsidy per reader (Baker, 1994; Curran, 1986). This is true to a lesser extent of commercial television because programmes select and deliver audiences with less precision than press publications. However, advertising pressure does cause some programme providers to court affluent viewers at the expense of low-income viewers in

order to garner higher advertising receipts, most notably in the USA (Gitlin, 1994; D'Acci, 1994). Advertising thus causes economic inequalities in society to be reproduced in the structure or audience orientation of some media.

The rule of the individual consumer turns out, on close inspection, to be subject to multiple limitations and distortions. There is also a more general sense in which the traditional conception of the media as a public representative does not seem to fit the contemporary media. A view formed when most media were partisan and 'spoke for' clearly defined constituencies seems less appropriate to market-based news systems, as in the USA, which are predominantly bi-partisan and define themselves in terms of disseminating 'information'.

The view of the media as tribunes speaking for particular constituencies thus seems almost obsolete. Yet, it is still worth retaining a notion of the media as a representative agency. The market also has a role to play in making media organizations responsive to the public. To these themes we shall return. It is sufficient to note here that conventional formulations about the representative role of the media need to be rethought.

Informational Role

In addition to the concept of the media as a watchdog and representative, commentators have also stressed its 'informational' role. This is usually portrayed in terms of facilitating self-expression, promoting public rationality and enabling collective self-determination. These different functions of the media can only be fulfilled adequately, it is argued, through the processes of a free market.

Thus, it is claimed that the free market allows anyone to publish an opinion who wishes to. This ensures allegedly that all significant points of view are aired, and that a wide range of information is made available from diverse and antagonistic sources. This promotes good judgement and wise government.

Originally, this claim was advanced in an assertive form based on the assumption that truth would always triumph over error in an unrestricted debate. However, the decline of Enlightenment notions of rationalism, and the naive empiricism that underpinned it, has caused this argument to be reformulated in a more circumspect way. Typical of this more cautious approach is the American jurist Oliver Holmes's much-quoted contention 'that the ultimate good desired is better reached by free trade in ideas — that the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market ...' (cit. Barron, 1975: 320). This argument has been elaborated in a variety of ways. The free market mobilizes the collective intellectual resources of the nation. It fosters public rationality by enabling collective judgements to be made in the knowledge of alternative courses of action; or, more simply, 'a free marketplace of ideas has a self-righting tendency to correct errors and biases' (Kelley and Donway, 1990: 90).

The market system is also celebrated as the best possible way of facilitating

self-government. Free market media inform citizens from a variety of viewpoints; they keep open the channels of communication between government and governed, and between different groups in society; and they provide a neutral zone for the formation of public opinion. In short, the processes of the market are central to the exercise of popular sovereignty.

These hosannas have come increasingly under attack even within the camp committed to the market system. One line of criticism has been that *market failure* has limited individual freedom of expression, and consequently prevented public debate from being adequately informed by diverse sources. As the influential Hutchins Commission argued as long ago as 1947, after noting the development of media concentration and restricted market entry: 'the right of free public discussion has therefore lost its earlier reality' (Commission on Freedom of the Press, reprinted 1974). This then prompted the argument that public rationality has been impaired, and collective direction has been weakened, because people with something useful to say have not always been given a chance to say it. As the American political theorist, Alexander Meiklejohn, put it: 'self-government is nonsense unless the "self" which governs is able and determined to make its will effective' (Meiklejohn, 1983: 276).

Critics also opened up another line of attack, arguing that the *inherent* characteristics of the market deplete the informational role of the media. The British equivalent of the Hutchins Commission – the 1947–49 Royal Commission on the Press – claimed that the press was failing to inform adequately the people because it was a product of the market. 'The failure of the Press to keep pace with the requirements of society', it concluded, 'is attributable largely to the plain fact that an industry that lives by the sale of its products must give the public what the public will buy' (RCP, 1949: 177). By implication, the inadequacy of the press was merely a reflection of the inadequacy of the public, printed large. This paternalistic judgement was subsequently reworked in a form that alleged that the pressure to maximize sales and ratings led to common denominator provision that underestimated the abilities of the public (Hoggart, 1957; Thompson, 1974). This very British debate was superseded by a less overtly moralistic analysis, on both sides of the Atlantic, which highlighted some of the characteristics of news produced within a market-oriented system: information that is simplified, condensed, personalized, decontextualized, with a stress on action rather than process, visualization rather than abstraction, stereotype rather than human complexity (Newcomb, 1987; Inglis, 1990; Gitlin, 1994; Hallin, 1994).¹² Since many of these criticisms were predicated on the assumption that these deficiencies were a by-product of processing news as a commodity for the mass market, they were an attack, by implication, on the notion that market processes safeguard the informational role of the media.

Professional Responsibility Model

At this point, it is worth following a short detour. Across the horizon loomed at a convenient moment the figure of the media professional, with the perfect

timing of the American cavalry riding to the rescue. It is no coincidence that both the Hutchins Commission and the Royal Commission of the Press concluded at about the same time that media professionalism was the solution to the shortcomings that they diagnosed. Journalists were urged to adopt the mantle of the professions. In this way, the media would be able to fulfill its informational role and serve the public interest (Commission on Freedom of the Press, 1974; RCP, 1949).

Their reports were followed by a series of ringing public endorsements of professional responsibility. The cult of professionalism became a way of reconciling market flaws with the traditional conception of the democratic role of the media. It asserted journalists' commitment to higher goals – neutrality, detachment, a commitment to truth. It involved the adoption of certain procedures for verifying facts, drawing on different sources, presenting rival interpretations. In this way, the pluralism of opinion and information, once secured through the clash of adversaries in the free market, could be recreated through the 'internal pluralism' of monopolistic media. Market pressures to sensationalize and trivialize the presentation of news could be offset by a commitment to inform. The democratic role of the media could thus be rehabilitated without structural reform.

The ideology of professional responsibility has found numerous celebrants for a variety of reasons, not all noble.¹³ But at its core is a seductive idea: professionalism means that the journalist's first duty is to serve the public. It proposes – certainly, as presented by its more radical advocates – that journalists should act as a counterweight to forces, both internal and external, that threaten the integrity of the media, including the controllers of media combines, advertisers, publicists and government (Hallin, 1994). By emphasizing accuracy and facticity, media professionalism seems to be defining the role of the media in a way that will assist people to make up their minds for themselves. Professionalism is thus seemingly a philosophy of empowerment rather than of control: professional self-interest appears, in this case, to coincide with the public interest.¹⁴

Professional commitments cannot exist in a vacuum, however. Journalists operate within certain structures which influence – and can distort – their definition of professionalism (Tuchman, 1978; Schlesinger, 1987; Tiffen, 1989; Bevins, 1990). The exercise of professional judgement also presupposes a high degree of autonomy. Although most American journalists stress their operational freedom, the evidence suggests that their journalistic autonomy has declined since the early 1970s, particularly in large news organizations (Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986). Journalistic autonomy has also been revoked or curbed by interventionist media managements elsewhere (Ericson, Baranek and Chan, 1987; Frenkel, 1994; Curran and Seaton, 1996). Put simply, professionalism is not assured within media organizations which do not have as their central goal the realization of professional norms. This is, indeed, one of the arguments for public service broadcasting.

Professionalism is also vulnerable because it is not clear on what basis it is justified. Journalism does not have the entry requirements, credentials and self-regulatory controls normally associated with a profession. Journalists have consequently an ambiguous status, and this can weaken their vocation. A repeated criticism levelled against journalists is that they tend to accept too

readily the definitions of events provided by the powerful (Hall et al., 1978; Entman, 1989; Abramson, 1990). But this is inscribed within a particular set of professional beliefs which defines implicitly the role of a journalist as a subaltern one of mediating authoritatively sourced information. Another version of professionalism stresses truth-seeking but this too is often interpreted in a restricted and defensive way. One truth-seeking strategy is the attempted 'scientization' of news reporting: the focusing on technical, strategic and insider perspectives of politics in a way that enables journalists to avoid being exposed as necessarily subjective participants in the political process (Hallin, 1994). Reporting elections, for example, in terms of campaign strategies and game plans, as a glorified horse race rather than as a democratic inquest, enables the journalist to take refuge in a 'neutral' form of interpretation. Another defensive strategy involves an almost mechanistic reliance on conventional news values. This can lead to the manipulation of the media by publicists skilled at generating news bites and photo-opportunities, and exploiting the news codes operated by journalists (Gitlin, 1991).

A further problem is that professionalism is itself ambiguous. It means different things to different people, and indeed different cultures. In the USA, TV news items on the major networks tend to take the form of structured, visually integrated, narrative texts whose meaning is relatively 'closed'. In Italy, by contrast – and, indeed, in much of Europe – TV news tends to be more 'open', with more 'talking heads', in which greater prominence is given to contrasting interpretations of events (Hallin and Mancini, 1984).¹⁵ This divergence reflects the more dominant political and interpretive role of political parties in many European countries compared with the USA, and the more ratings-conscious commercialism of American TV. But it also reflects a different definition of professionalism, predicated on a different understanding of the place of broadcasters in society. In the USA, the accent is on entertainment and disclosure – reporting news as a structured 'story' whose meaning is clearly signified by the reporter. In many European countries, greater emphasis is given to the role of broadcaster as a factual witness and passive mediator, who enables the viewer to have access to competing interpretations of the world.¹⁶

In sum, the ideology of professionalism does not provide an adequate way of realizing the democratic role of the media, although it is sometimes presented in these terms by critical writers in the free market tradition. This approach is misconceived partly because professional commitments need structures to support them, and partly because the code of professionalism is itself ambiguous. This ambiguity masks an unresolved debate about the democratic role of the media.

Defects of Traditional Perspective

This debate is unresolved partly because there is no agreement about what form the informational role of the media should take. Critics point out that traditional conceptions tend to be framed in terms of individual-centred understandings of the democratic process (Curran, 1991). The role of the

media is defined in terms of briefing the voter, affording a conduit of communication between government and the citizen, and providing the basis on which public opinion (conceived as the aggregate of individual opinion) is formed.

This perspective is incomplete because it harks back to an almost pre-industrial conception of polity. In modern liberal democracies, individuals seek to advance their interests, look for protection, and try to influence public opinion and government through collective organizations such as political parties, trade unions, business associations and the myriad structures of civil society. These are the building blocks of the contemporary democratic system. Traditional liberal theory has nothing to say about how the media should relate to these, and enhance their democratic performance.

The second defect of the traditional approach is that it maintains an artificial and untenable distinction between information and representation. It does this by detaching information from its political and social context. Thus, the traditional criterion for judging the successful functioning of the informational role of the media is normally held to be one of two things: the 'quality' of their discourse or the number of media outlets which, as Horwitz (1991) shows in an admirable essay, is increasingly the yardstick being adopted in American jurisprudence.

Missing from this analysis is a recognition that ideas and systems of representation are part of the discursive arsenal which competing groups use to advance their interests. This point can be understood in a very simple and rudimentary way in terms of political agendas. Political parties on the right tend, in general, to emphasize law and order, defence and international relations, because these are areas where they are often perceived by voters to be strong. Parties on the left tend to emphasize welfare and employment, because these are issues on which they tend to score highly. Rival political parties consequently vie with each other at election time to get broadcasters to make their 'issues' the dominant themes of election coverage. How broadcasters respond to – and, in effect, arbitrate between – these rival agendas can have a significant influence on the outcome of tight elections.¹⁷

A comparable but more complex process of contestation takes place between divergent social groups. Different ways of interpreting and making sense of society, different linguistic codes and conceptual categories, different chains of association and versions of 'common sense' privilege the interests of some while disadvantaging others. The media's informational role is never purely informational: it is also a way of arbitrating between the discursive frameworks of organized groups in ways that can potentially affect the distribution of resources and rewards in society.

The case for ideological diversity is thus not simply that it promotes a rational debate based on an awareness of alternatives. It is also a way of promoting social justice in which divergent social groups have the opportunity to define their interests in their own terms and promote them in the public domain. It is in this context that the role of the media in facilitating social agreement should be understood. Traditionalists argue that the media should mediate conflict through the determination of accurate information and contrary opinion. This is an entirely reasonable proposition on the face of things. However, it can mask, in reality, a process of manipulation in which

one class or social coalition is able to naturalize and universalize its interests because it dominates the channels of cultural production. The media may give the appearance of distributing accurate information and facilitating a debate based on conflicting argument. Indeed, it may actually be doing both these things. However, by confining this debate to 'legitimate' areas of controversy, and by grounding it on assumptions that do not challenge the structure of social power, it may also be engineering a contrived form of social consent.

The third limitation of the classical liberal model – and, one that is often alluded to – is that it overstates the rationality of public discourse. As Chafee (1983: 294) puts it, 'I can no longer think of open discussion as operating like an electric mixer. . . . Run it a little while and truth will rise to the top with the dregs of error going down to the bottom'. His reservations were based on distortions in the distribution of information, the outpouring of information on a scale that is impossible for any one individual to assimilate and, above all, the subjective element in making judgements (cf. Peterson, 1956). This last point has been highlighted by research emphasizing non-rational elements in opinion formation, and by studies emphasizing the highly selective way in which people assimilate communications (Graber, 1988; Neuman, Just and Grigler, 1992). In reality, public discourse does not always follow the rational pathways of the classic liberal model.

The fourth, and related, limitation is that entertainment is usually omitted from conventional analysis of the media's democratic functioning because it does not conform to a classic liberal conception of rational exchange. But, in fact, media entertainment is one means by which people engage at an intuitive and expressive level in a public dialogue about the direction of society (Curran, 1991). For example, how crime is represented in fiction – whether it is portrayed in terms of innate evil or interpreted in a social context – offers understandings that potentially influence attitudes to penal policy. More generally, media fiction provides cognitive maps that structure and interpret reality, and provide a commentary upon our common social processes. It is in this sense an integral part of the media's 'informational' role.

Entertainment is also excluded because it is assumed that the sole democratic purpose of the public debate staged by the media is to effect changes of government policy and exercise democratic control over the state. This implies too restricted a definition of its purpose, based on an unacceptable distinction between public and private life that the feminist slogan, 'politics is personal', rightly challenges. The normative debate conducted through media fiction is an important means by which social norms guiding human interaction are affirmed, adapted and revised (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1984).

The fifth defect of the traditional model is, of course, that it fails to distinguish between the legal right to publish, and the economic opportunity to do so. For reasons that have already been given, limitations on market entry restrict individual freedom of expression. But it also restricts – and this is a category that does not feature in traditional analysis – freedom of group expression. Whole groups in society, not merely individuals, have restricted access to the public sphere through the media. This has undermined, in turn, self-government in the interests of all. It has limited the ability of sections of the community to voice effectively their interests, their opinions, their view of relative priorities. This has prevented other groups from responding to, indeed

even sometimes being aware of, these different definitions.¹⁸ The democratic process for making collective judgements about the development of society has thus been weakened because it has not been, in an adequate and attainable sense, collective.

Alternative Perspective

Implicit or explicit in these criticisms are suggestions for rethinking the informational role of the media. These can be briefly stated in summary form.

The public dialogue staged by the media should give the public access to a diversity of values and perspectives in entertainment as well as public affairs coverage. By generating a plurality of understandings, the media should enable individuals to reinterpret their social experience, relate this to alternative conceptions of society and human nature, and question the assumptions and ideas of the dominant culture. It should also enable every one, on the basis of diverse perspectives and sources, to decide for themselves how best to safeguard and advance their welfare in collective as well as individual terms, and weigh this in the balance in relation to alternative definitions of the wider, public interest.

This will be emancipatory in a number of ways. It will give subordinate classes and groups increased access to ideas and arguments opposed to those that legitimate their subordination, and enable them to explore more fully ways of changing the structure of society to their advantage. Media fiction that enables people to explore imaginatively what it is like to be 'other', in different circumstances and with different formative experiences, is also likely to promote empathy and understanding, and assist in the creation of alliances for social advance.

Another (and complementary) democratic function of the media system is to act as an agency of representation. It should be organized in a way that enables diverse social groups and organizations to express alternative viewpoints. This goes beyond, however, simply disseminating diverse opinion in the public domain. Part of the media system should function in a way that invigorates civil society. It should assist collective organizations to mobilize support; help them to operate as representative vehicles for the views of their supporters; and aid them to register effective protests and develop and promulgate alternatives. In other words, the representational role of the media includes helping to promote the conditions in which alternative viewpoints and perspectives are brought fully into play.

Diversity at both the level of expression and consumption are two sides of the same coin. However, underlying the stress on diversity of expression is also an implicit commitment to promoting participation in the democratic structures of society as a means of enabling different groups to define and articulate their interests in societies where differences and conflicts are often repressed. It implies a distancing from the classical liberal model in which private individuals, with an underlying harmony of interest, are brought into communion with each other through mass communications in order to divine and pursue their common purpose. This is a recipe for control from above,

given the way in which elites tend to define the agendas and terms of reference of mass communications in societies characterized by a low level of democratic activity.

The third democratic function of the media is to assist the realization of the objectives of society through agreement or compromise between opposed groups. The media should contribute to this process by facilitating democratic procedures for resolving conflict and defining collectively agreed aims. For example, the media should inform the electorate about the political choices involved in elections, and so help to constitute elections as defining moments for collective decision about the direction of society. The media should also facilitate the exercise of continuing public pressure on government by giving due publicity to the self-organized groups of civil society. It should also be recognized that the core media of society are also an important mechanism for collective reconciliation. They have an obligation to ensure that diverse groups participate in the dialogue they mediate as part of the process of furthering equitable agreement or compromise.

However, one problem arising from this conception of a democratic media system is that it will make the attainment of collective agreement more difficult. In most societies, the media are linked to the hierarchy of power, and tend to promote social integration and control. An approach that seeks, by contrast, to destabilize this link, and allocate effective communications resources to subordinate and dissident groups is liable to unleash fissiparous forces in ways that are unpredictable. It could result in reinforcing class and other forms of resistance to the social order. Equally, it could also lead to the strengthening of solidarities based on ethnicity, religion and region at a time when general societal ties appear to be weakening.

There needs, therefore, to be built into this conception of an alternative communications system a conscious commitment to achieving some kind of equilibrium between conflict and conciliation, fragmentation and unity. The intention is to create spaces in which differently constituted groups can communicate effectively with themselves in order to facilitate the self-organization needed to advance their collective interests in society. At the same time, these divergent groups need also to be brought into an arena of common discourse where reciprocal debate can take place in order to facilitate a peaceful compromise. Underlying this argument, indeed informing the entire conception of this alternative approach, is a desire to replace tacit acceptance of the social order based on social domination with an equitable social settlement based on the effective articulation and conciliation of conflicting interests.

What might this media system look like in terms of structure and organization? What kinds of journalism would it foster? These questions beg further questions in the sense that the design of any media system needs to take into account the generation of pleasure and cultural provision, which are issues that lie outside the terms of reference of this essay. Any prescription based only on what serves the democratic needs of society can only be a partial input to a larger debate. But, with this qualification in mind, what does a re-evaluation of the democratic functioning of the media imply in terms of concrete practice?

Towards a Working Model

The outline that follows may seem to American eyes detached from political reality. Although it does not exist in any country as a functioning model, however, it draws upon and composites features derived from the practice of different European countries. Indeed, it is proposed in this form precisely because it works with the grain of what is attainable.

The model can be viewed at a glance in Figure 5.1. It has a core sector, constituted by general interest TV channels which reach a mass audience. They provide the means by which divergent groups are able to communicate, and also be exposed to, differing opinions, perspectives and values. Because these channels still reach the majority of the public, they offer an opportunity for different classes and groups to take part in the same public dialogue about the direction of society. They provide scope, therefore, for different groups to interact with one another and engage in a reciprocal discussion. They also make widely available different understandings of society enabling individuals to explore where their self-interest lies, and relate this to rival definitions of the common interest.

These mass TV channels also provide a sheet anchor in a highly differentiated media system which is organized to accentuate difference. By providing a common stock of shared experience, by conferring prominence on communal symbols of identification, by transmitting public events that enable society to see itself in an idealized way or which celebrate a shared value or memory, they serve as a focal point of collective unity and reinforce ties of social association in society (Peters, 1989; Scannell and Cardiff, 1991; Dayan and Katz, 1992). They are important within this framework as agencies that promote a culture of mutuality that facilitate agreement or compromise.

This core sector is fed by peripheral media sectors, three of which are intended to facilitate the expression of dissenting and minority views. The

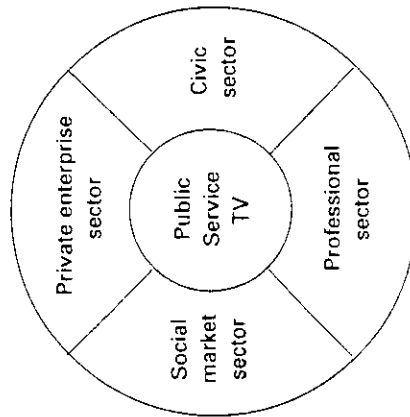


Fig. 5.1

civic media sector consists of channels of communication linked to organized groups and social networks. The *professional* media sector occupies a space wholly independent of both the state and the market in which professional communicators relate to the public on their own terms, with the minimum of constraint. The *social market* sector sustains provision by groups with limited financial resources. To this is added a conventional *market* sector which relates to the public as consumers, and whose central rationale within the media system is to act as a restraint on the over-entrenchment of minority concerns to the exclusion of majority pleasures.

This highly differentiated media system, in which different sectors are organized on different principles, is designed to facilitate the expression of a plurality of perspectives. Publicly accountable in multiple ways, it is intended to give rise to a media system that is broadly representative of the society it serves. Above all, its architecture is designed to create spaces for the communication of opposed viewpoints, and a common space for their mediation. Both the detail and thinking behind this outline are explored further below in the hope that it will trigger further debate.

Core Media: Public Service Solutions

In principle, the best way to organize the core media sector is to entrust them to public service organizations (whether in the form of publicly owned or publicly regulated commercial organizations). Potentially, this offers the best prospect of opening up broad social access to the airwaves, and enabling viewers to plug into different views and perspectives. It also creates the framework in which general interest channels find peak-time space for news and current affairs, and are committed to wider social and cultural objectives (such as making high-quality programmes). The system of payment for public service organizations also ensures that there are no second-class citizens excluded by price from the general forum of public debate. A deregulated commercial system will, by contrast, tend to restrict the range of views and social interests represented on general interest channels, give lower priority to public affairs coverage and subordinate wider objectives to maximizing audiences.

However, the theory of public service broadcasting does not necessarily correspond to reality. One problem is that government can undermine the independence of public broadcasting institutions, and restrict the public debate conducted through their channels. The travails of the French and Greek broadcasting systems provide a particularly stark cautionary tale in this respect, although government control is diminishing in the first case (Kuhn, 1995; Dimitras, 1992). There are two classic ways of dealing with this problem. One is the *liberal corporatist* model, perhaps best exemplified by the German broadcasting system, in which representatives from different social groups are appointed to broadcasting authorities and given real power. This pluralistic system of control is buttressed by institutional and legal guidelines, a constitutional guarantee both of freedom of expression and of audience access to diverse information, and the devolution of power (Porter

and Hasselbach, 1991a; 1991b; Hoffman-Riem, 1992a; 1992b). The other approach, exemplified by the British broadcasting system, is the *civil service* model in which 'public trustees' for the nation are appointed to broadcasting authorities, but in which broadcasters are given in reality a considerable amount of freedom to interpret public service guidelines within depoliticized institutions (Curran and Seaton, 1996; Tunstall, 1993; McNair, 1993).

The former incorporates diverse political pressures as a way of frustrating government control, while the latter seeks to insulate broadcasting from political pressure by emphasizing its independent neutrality. Of the two, argues Etzioni-Halevy (1987) in a prescient study, the latter is the more brittle and vulnerable if exposed to a sustained government onslaught. The British broadcasting system maintained, as we have seen, a critical relationship to government during a period characterized by an unprecedentedly aggressive assault on its autonomy (Barnett and Curry, 1994). But this chastening experience underlines the need to reinforce the autonomy of the British broadcasting system by distancing it still further from government. One insulating device is to limit government financial control by index-linking the licence fee to the rise of national earnings; another is to remove the government's power of unmediated patronage by 'franchising' representative organizations and broadcasting staff to elect or nominate people to broadcasting authorities.

A second, more intractable, problem is that public service broadcasting organizations tend to be unduly influenced by the political class (even if they offer more ideologically 'open' and diverse systems of representation than commercial TV in the United States). The German and British broadcasting systems both exemplify this weakness. In the German case, the pluralistic pattern of appointments to broadcasting councils is insufficiently representative. It needs to include fewer party nominees, and more representatives from social, cultural and other organizations including 'guestworkers' and the new social movements (such as feminists and environmentalists). In the case of British broadcasting, the core concept of pluralistic representation is surprisingly absent in the legal basis and official reports on broadcasting organizations and needs to be made an explicit objective of the broadcasting system. This said, the finetuning of broadcast rules and structures, though desirable, is unlikely to transform existing practice. This is because the nature of the public dialogue conducted through public service TV relates to the wider public debate taking place in society. The basic strategy that has been adopted is to seek to pluralize public service broadcasting by reinvestigating the debate on which it draws through the strengthening of sectionalist media.

The third problem that can beset public service broadcasting is unresponsiveness to popular demand. Here, the comparative record of public service broadcasters varies considerably, and underlines the need for regulated competition. Public service monopolies (as, until recently, in Sweden) and predominantly anti-market, broadcasting systems controlled by organized groups that are no longer representative (as in the Netherlands) experienced a sharp loss of support once alternatives became available (McQuail, 1992; Nieuwenhuis, 1993; Ang, 1991; Hadenius, 1992). On the other hand, those systems that incorporated regulated market competition early on, and made historical adjustments to ratings pressures, proved much more resilient.

Thus Britain, the first major European country to introduce regulated commercial TV, has a popular public broadcasting system that, despite intense competition from cable TV and Murdoch's Sky satellite channels, still accounted in mid-1995 for 92 per cent of viewers' time.¹⁹

In the long term, the diffusion of new communications technology threatens to disperse the TV audience and, consequently, to fragment the forum of societal debate established through public service television. In the medium term, it also threatens to destabilize the economy of national public broadcasting systems by establishing a distribution system that bypasses national protectionist legislation, and delivers internationally 'syndicated' programmes at a fraction of the cost of originating programmes for domestic consumption. This could result in some public service broadcasting systems, with falling audiences and revenues, relying on cheap imports. Beyond a certain point, this would impair their ability to sustain collective self-expression in a national context (and one that largely corresponds to existing democratic structures).

However, the imminent demise of traditional public service regimes is greatly exaggerated. While cable, satellite, digitization and the development of on-line and interactive services will eventually transform the media landscape, the pace of change both in terms of the trend towards the global consumption of TV programmes and the public take-up of new TV services is much less than commercially self-interested hype suggests.²⁰ Moreover, public service broadcasters are not powerless to defend themselves if they have popular and political support, and circumstances seem to warrant their defence. Cross-frontier communications systems are subject to internationally agreed controls – in the context of Europe through the European Union and the Council of Europe – and these can be revised to include programme import and domestic investment quotas. But a satisfactory case for strengthening these controls, at least in Europe, has yet to be made.

Civic Media Sector

The civic media sector is like an umbilical cord linking core media to the life force of civil society. It offers a network of sources and contacts that journalists can draw upon when reporting or analyzing a story. However, this is only one way in which civic media enable organized groups to reach out to, and engage with, a wider public. Some civic media, like the *The Big Issue*, a skilfully edited magazine sold by the homeless that draws attention to the housing and poverty crisis in Britain, has won a wider audience in the general public. The other main function of the civic media sector is to provide an internal channel of communication within groups and constituencies, and facilitate their self-organization.

The civic media sector is constituted by three main tiers. The top tier consists of media (such as party-controlled, general-interest newspapers and local radio stations) which are linked to collective organizations but are aimed, in principle at least, at a general audience with the intention of winning wider support. They are usually adversarial in approach, and provide

a way of sustaining and renewing a particular perspective of society that reflects the commitments and priorities of an organized group. The second tier consists of subcultural media (such as magazines for gays and lesbians) which relate to a constituency rather than an organized group. They can, nonetheless, have an important organizational role. They can foster a positive collective identity, promote a sense of group unity and project goals that can only be realized through collective action.²¹ The third tier consists of organizational media (for example, a national trade union journal or a newsletter of a local parents association) which serve as channels of communication between members of a group. These can provide a link between leaders, activists and supporters, reinforce commitment to the organization, relay information relevant to its functioning, and provide an internal forum for developing new ideas and strategies.

The civic media sector is in trouble. The party political press has wilted in many countries in the face of competition from entertainment oriented tabloids (Hoyer, Hadenius and Weibull, 1975). Advertising has contributed to a lopsided development of the specialist press by heavily subsidizing the growth of publications that deliver a desired target market (such as doctors or those interested in home improvements), while providing much less support for media, such as political magazines, which do not conform to the market categories desired by advertisers (Curran, 1986). The development of intra-organizational media has been skewed also by the rapid growth of company magazines and videos.

The civic media sector can be reinvigorated in two ways. One strategy is to give social and political groups control over part of the minority broadcasting system. This could include direct control over radio stations, time share and access to the technical facilities of minority TV channels, and must-carry rules for cable TV operators. In Malta, for example, two key blocs in society – the Labour party and the Catholic Church – each have control of a radio station.²²

The other (though not mutually exclusive) approach is to establish a public agency, funded by an advertising tax, to assist the launch or development of civic media. The agency would have all party representation, and would assist those projects which would most contribute to the vigour of the civic media. It could function as a modified version of the Swedish Press Subsidies Board (Hulten, 1984).

Professional Media Sector

Journalists working for adversarial media linked to organized interests function partly as propagandists. Those working for traditional public service organizations operate within certain constraints; they tend to adopt a detached rather than committed stance, with a stress on mediating competing truths rather than revealing the truth. Those working for profit-driven organizations often define professionalism in terms of market values. All these different approaches contribute to the plurality of perspectives that a healthy media system should promote. There is also a need for an additional voice –

that of the independent, truth-seeking journalist – operating within an environment that encourages journalistic autonomy.

Establishing a professional sector also represents a way of establishing a section of the media that speaks to the public in a different way. It can relate to society not in terms of state-defined rules, as in the case of public service broadcasting, nor in terms of the goals of organized groupings, as in the case of the civic sector, nor in terms of audience ratings and sales, as with the market sector, but on terms defined by professional communicators alone.

What voices emerge will depend on how journalists and programme-makers respond to the opportunities given to them. But there is a vacuum that needs to be filled: the revival of a radical, unaligned, populist style of truth-seeking in fiction and its equivalent in journalism. During its heyday in late nineteenth-century Europe and America, its effect was to expand the boundaries of social conscience by highlighting the plight of the vulnerable, and of those who, due to their lack of organization, were not in a strong position to assert a claim on the rest of society.

The professional sector will not simply add to the diversity of the media system. It also builds into it an important watchdog element. Public service broadcasting is linked to the state; the market sector is dominated by big business; the civic sector – or, at least, the most influential part of it – is controlled by collectively organized interests. There is a need for a professional sector which is a bedrock of independence and which can be relied upon to maintain a critical surveillance of all power centres in society, and expose them to the play of public opinion.

An institutional environment should be created which gives programme-makers the maximum degree of freedom. This could take the form of two skeletal organizations – one controlling a minority TV channel, and the other a minority radio channel – which would commission rather than make programmes. This would insure that programmes were made mostly in small, informal production companies. Members of boards running the two channels could be elected by people working in the radio and TV industries. Funding for the two channels could be supplemented by spectrum fees charged annually on commercial TV and radio franchise holders as a way of relieving economic pressure. The professional media sector would be free of the guidelines that regulate the public service sector. The aim, in short, is to establish ideal conditions in which creative and journalistic talent can serve the community free of constraint.

Private Enterprise Sector

Competition encourages responsiveness to audience demand. The presence of a private enterprise sector, driven by market criteria, provides a countervailing influence to the other forces that shape the media system as a whole. Thus, the core public service sector – though organized in terms of competing organizations – prioritizes non-commercial goals. The civic media sector is governed primarily by the concerns of the constituencies to which it is linked. The professional sector elevates the norms of profes-

sional communicators. The private enterprise sector, by contrast, is geared to maximizing audience demand. The tendency of private enterprise media to privilege right-wing perspectives will also contribute to the diversity of the media as a whole.

A private enterprise sector also strengthens, to some extent, the watchdog role of the media. The conventional assumption that it is a wholly independent check on the government is mistaken because the economic forces that control commercial media can also have links to government. But a private enterprise sector is vulnerable to government influence in a different way from organizations formally linked to the state – and, in this difference, there is a modest measure of security.

A substantial private enterprise sector should have a major presence in the press and perhaps the new TV industries. A deregulated commercial, over-the-air TV sector should not be established, however, because it would undermine the pluralism of the rest of the broadcasting system. It would scoop advertising revenue needed to sustain alternatives. It would also generate pressure on its rivals to converge towards the middle ground at the expense of minority provision and minority perspectives.

There is, however, a strong case for intervening in the management of the private enterprise sector by separating ownership from control. One way of responding to the increasing concentration of media ownership is legally to underwrite the freedom of editors and their equivalents in the editorial sphere, and to introduce new rules for staff participation in their appointment. Senior executives would still be forced to respond to market pressures, but they would be free to do so in more diverse ways than under the present system of increasingly centralized control.

Social Market Sector

A major deficiency of the market sector is that it no longer functions in the way that it is supposed to in theory. Concentration of media ownership and high market entry costs restrict competition, limit choice and reduce the influence that consumers are able to bring to bear.

One response to this problem, exemplified by the Swedish press subsidies system, is to modify the ground rules of competition. The Swedish approach (and its equivalent in Norway) seeks to neutralize the causes of unequal competition and concentration rather than attempt to treat unsuccessfully its symptoms through inefficient anti-monopoly measures (Gustafsson, 1993a; 1993b). This has given rise to a subsidy which allocates graduated production subsidies to secondary papers that lack the advertising and scale economy advantages of market leaders. It has succeeded in maintaining editorial diversity without leading to government control of the press (Gustafsson, 1993a; Picard, 1988; Strid and Weibull, 1988).

An alternative approach – and one that is more easily realizable in societies that lack Sweden's tenacious social democratic culture – is to establish a social market sector as a way of regenerating the market. Its central purpose is

to incubate new forms of competition, rooted in social forces underrepresented in the market, as a way of extending real consumer choice and power.

This objective can be advanced in three ways. Innovative forms of media organization – such as self-managing enterprises, cooperatives and organizations with consumer or community representation – can be introduced and supported in order to extend diversity of output. A successful example of this is the establishment in Britain of Channel 4, a national television channel with a remit to innovate and serve minorities, funded through advertising, and a guaranteed safety-net income from the main commercial TV network.²³ The Channel 4 model – a cross-subsidized centre of innovation that commissions rather than produces programmes – could be introduced in other media sectors, most notably radio.

Second, a public funding agency can be established to fund challenges to the media conglomerates from groups with limited resources and a reasonable prospect of success. Sectors where such an agency could have a considerable impact is local radio, specialist book publishing, political journals, and specialist audio-products where entry costs are still relatively low.

Third, tough anti-monopoly measures can be introduced to limit market domination by the major conglomerates. This can take the form not merely of setting ceilings for expansion but of curbing excessive cross-media concentration through enforced divestment. If this is to result in a broadening of the social base of media ownership, however, a public agency has to be in place to assist staff-management buy-outs. Otherwise, anti-monopoly controls are liable to result merely in the reshuffling of ownership between major players in a form that accords with the new rules.

Retrospect

Implicit in this outline is a complex set of requirements for a democratic media system. It should empower people by enabling them to explore where their interest lies; it should foster sectional solidarities and assist the functioning of organizations necessary for the effective representation of collective interests; it should sustain vigilant scrutiny of government and centres of power; it should provide a source of protection and redress for weak and unorganized interests; and it should create the conditions for real societal agreement or compromise based on an open working through of differences rather than a contrived consensus based on domination. This can be best realized through the establishment of a core public service broadcasting system, encircled by a private enterprise, social market, professional and civic media sectors. These latter will strengthen the functioning of public service broadcasting as an open system of dialogue, and give added impetus to the collective, self-organized tradition of civil society. In short this represents a reworking, in a contemporary context, of Habermas's historical idyll with which we started this essay.

Notes

- 1 My thanks to the staff and students at the Department of Communications, Department of Communications, University of California, San Diego for helpful suggestions incorporated into this essay.
- 2 'Liberal' is a confusing word, meaning different things in Britain and the USA. It is used here in its British historical sense, and refers to the body of thought developed by liberals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For an account of their thinking in nineteenth-century Britain, see Boyce (1978) and Curran (1978); and for the eighteenth century, in both Britain and America, see Holmes (1990).
- 3 Recent studies of the media which have drawn heavily upon Habermas include, among others, Dahlgren (1987); Elliott (1986); Garnham (1986); Hallin and Mancini (1984); Scannell (1989); Skogerbo (1990); Keane (1991); Hallin (1994); Hoynes (1994); and Stevenson (1995).
- 4 Indeed, Habermas himself revised implicitly his earlier, pessimistic assessment by emphasizing subsequently audience adaptation and resistance to mediated meanings. See Habermas (1984: 391 ff.) which confusingly was translated and published in English before his first book (1989). See also Habermas (1992).
- 5 It should be noted, however, that exposures of state illegality occurred in state-linked media in Sweden and the USSR, while broadcasting in the USA (then subject to more regulation than now) also played a role in the Watergate saga. In reality, investigative journalism is not confined to free market media.
- 6 Estimates for the proportion of public affairs content in contemporary media are provided by Curran and Seaton (1996); Strid and Weibull (1988); and Neumann (1986) cit. Abramson (1990).
- 7 A useful, evaluative survey of different approaches in the political economy tradition is provided by Murdoch (1982). A persuasively circumspect presentation of the radical political economy approach is provided in the essay by Golding and Murdoch in this volume.
- 8 This is particularly well documented in Etzioni-Halevy's (1987) comparative study. For additional information about the British government's failed attempt to suppress a 'Real Lives' documentary about sectarianism in northern Ireland – with striking parallels to the *Observer* saga – see also Leapman (1987) and Barnett and Curry (1994).
- 9 In the 1990s, the relationship between the Conservative government and Conservative press became more strained partly for factional reasons (with some Conservative papers attacking the government from the right) and partly because of the government's loss of public support.
- 10 These were two soft-porn, depoliticized papers, *Sport* and *Sunday Sport*; two centrist papers reaching a small, advertising-rich elite audience, the *Independent* and *Independent on Sunday*; and a tabloid daily, *Today*, which closed in 1995.
- 11 Michael Schudson's essay in this volume provides a useful summary of this literature. For a striking account of the way in which journalists can both resent and resist audience pressure, see Gans (1979).
- 12 A good example of this approach is provided by Hallin (1994) who shows that the average 'sound bite' on American network TV news declined from over forty seconds in 1968 to under ten seconds in the 1980s.
- 13 For iconoclastic accounts of media professionalism, see in particular Schudson (1978), Schiller (1981), Tuchman (1978) and Elliott (1978).
- 14 This leads logically to a demand either for industrial democracy (see Ascher-son, 1978) or for legal protection of journalistic autonomy (see Baistow, 1985). Though these arguments are seductive, they also raise a problem. Journalists tend to share the same news values, and to hunt in packs and develop group judgements.

The greater empowerment of journalists across all media could lead potentially, therefore, to greater editorial uniformity. Partly for this reason, the proposal at the end of this essay adopts a deliberately selective approach to under-writing journalistic control.

- 15 Hallin and Mancini's penetrating essay relates to only one European country, Italy, which has a distinctive TV system and political culture. There are affinities, nevertheless, between TV news in Italy and other European countries.
- 16 This definition was made particularly explicit in Germany, following a wide public debate about the role of the broadcaster. See Williams (1976).
- 17 For an example of the way in which media agenda setting and 'priming' can affect election results, see Iyengar and Kinder (1987).
- 18 A minor but telling illustration of the way in which different groups can be ignorant of what the other thinks, even though they live cheek by jowl in ostensibly integrated communities, occurred when I conducted jointly two group discussions in an East Anglia village for the Eastern Counties Newspapers Group. When asked what most concerned them, the first group of working-class couples said that they were worried about the lack of good job prospects for their children, the lack of leisure facilities for the young, and the problem of social discipline among teenagers. The second group of middle-class couples was mainly concerned about the environment and the threat of increased urbanization in the area (which would generate a wider range of jobs and more leisure facilities) and were convinced that the first group fully shared their concerns. When informed that this was not the case, they were visibly taken aback, with some arguing rightly that the local paper should have alerted them to what other people in the community were feeling. This may seem to illustrate an aspect of rural, socially stratified England. But other monopoly papers also fail to provide an adequate channel of communication between social classes in their local community. For example the *Los Angeles Times*, arguably one of the best daily papers in the USA, with enormous resources at its disposal, was nevertheless quite extraordinarily uninformative about what members of Los Angeles's large working class were thinking and feeling – and gave few indications that the city was due to have in 1992 one of the most serious riots in twentieth-century America.
- 19 Derived from BARR, June 1995.
- 20 The experience of the USA suggests that new TV services are not going to lead to an immediate fragmentation of the mass audience. It has a mature, multi-channel TV system in which the majority of households have cable TV. Yet four networks control well over half the market. As for global homogenization, Sepstrup (1990) shows how misleading are figures based on 'international flows' of programmes. Although imported programmes account for a relatively high share of TV fiction, and of the output of some small TV economies, many programmes are not traded internationally and are originated locally.
- 21 For the way in which media for sexual minorities can have an indirect but important organizational role, see Gross (1989).
- 22 This approach has been developed also in Italy where three political parties were given in effect control over three TV channels, and in the Netherlands where experience of both countries suggests that sectional control over core media reinforces a subdivision of the general public sphere in a way that discourages reciprocal dialogue between different social blocs in society. This problem is avoided if this strategy is confined to minority broadcasting, with mass broadcasting organised on a civil service or liberal corporatist model.
- 23 In the event, Channel 4 proved so financially successful that safety-net arrangements led to transfer payments from the minority to mass TV channel – the

reverse of what was anticipated. But Channel 4's success reveals what can be achieved if broadcasters are given increased freedom within a financially secure environment.

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Mass Media and Society

Second Edition

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1996



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