The People and the Public
Radical Democracy and the Role of Public Media

Oliver Marchart

Essay – December 31, 2007

According to political, cultural and media theorist Oliver Marchart, the degree to which public media are actually public depends on the political significance invested in the concept of democracy. He believes the main prerequisite for achieving a democratic media is the creation of an absolute democratic hegemony.

Part I: The Public and the Media

The focus of this essay is on one very simple question: how can a democratic – even a radically democratic – media policy be achieved, particularly with respect to public media?

In order to arrive at an answer – which can only be preliminary – to this question, we have to confront a whole range of questions regarding not only the nature of public media but also the nature of the state, of media policy, of politics and of democracy. Any attempt at answering this question has to start from an unstable and shifting terrain: To put it in the words of discourse analyst Jakob Torfing: 'The information society is not an established fact, but a terrain that is sustained and divided by social antagonisms and constantly reshaped by hegemonic struggles.' [1]

His statement has important consequences, for what it implies, in principle, is that the very terrain of the information society, if it is a hegemonic and thus political terrain, is open to change – and open to change not only for the worse, even if certain signs do point in that direction, but also the better. In other words, processes or developments within the information society do not unfold according to an iron logic or to irreversible laws (whether they be the laws of the market or the laws of what is presented as the only possible form of journalistic professionalism) that inevitably lead to a predictable outcome. Rather, the outcome of these processes is open because it is subjected to hegemonic struggle and, consequently, to progressive and emancipatory change. Again, the supposedly iron laws of the market, while they may seem victorious at certain moments, do not proceed without encountering resistance from highly diverse forces – for example, the forces of alternative media and counter-media. All this takes place on a contested terrain, and what I want to sketch here – in a most preliminary fashion – are not only the contours of our status quo (concerning public media), which can be rather depressing at times, but also the emancipatory or radical democratic answers that can be used to address the status quo. This article, therefore, is divided in two parts. The first part, written from the viewpoint of political theory, is an overview of what I perceive to be the main obstacles to the development of a truly democratic public space in public media. This necessarily involves a reflection on the very nature of 'the public' or 'publicness' and the mass media, together with reflections on the nature of politics and of democracy. In the second part, I try to give a couple of answers or to at least suggest possible counter-strategies for a status quo that

does not seem particularly conducive to a progressive or emancipatory redefinition of the role of public media. Admittedly, such counter-strategies imply, of necessity, a more informal usage of alternative media and counter-media.

Public Sphere

Let us begin with the simplest question. When talking about 'public broadcasting' or 'public media', what do we actually mean by 'public'? Why and, to put it differently, to what extent can public media reasonably be called 'public'? Common sense tells us that they are public because they constitute a public sphere. But can it be taken for granted that simply by virtue of being received by a mass public, by a mass audience, they do establish a public sphere and thus can be called 'public' media? On the other hand, if we derive the qualifier 'public' from the structure of their ownership, can it be taken for granted that simply by virtue of being owned publicly (that is to say, by virtue of being in public rather than in private hands) they can be called, and reasonably be called, 'public' media?

The answer to both questions is simply no. One of the last things so-called public media do nowadays is to actually constitute a public sphere. In a previous paper entitled 'Media Darkness', [2] which is a kind of prototype of the reflections presented here, I proposed a series of criteria or preconditions for the emergence of a truly public space. Let us look at the argument as developed there.

Since Habermas, the first and most obvious criterion for publicness is accessibility. A space that is not accessible – physically or otherwise – is not a public space. It is a space of exclusion and, in this sense, a private space. Only if, potentially, everybody can gain access to a certain space can this space be called 'public' in the strict sense. One barely has to mention the fact that most so-called public media do not meet this criterion of accessibility – not only because they are inaccessible physically (since public space in the strict sense is not a physical space) but also because they do not allow for voices other than the usual ones to be made public. Only the dominant or hegemonic discourses are allowed access. I will return to the question of hegemony later, but let me just say that nothing is more misleading than the common-sensical notion of freedom of opinion as long as there are no media through which opinions can be transmitted. In a liberal democracy we may own the right to have our own opinions, but if these opinions cannot be heard publicly, what are we to do with them? Carry them within our hearts, as personal secrets? Even under authoritarian conditions of tyranny or despotism, it is perfectly possible to be granted the right to have private opinions – as long as we do not express them publicly. If democracy differs from authoritarianism, as the definitions suggest, it is precisely because those in a democracy have not only the right to hold personal opinions but also the actual opportunity to voice them publicly, that is to say, to have a voice that can be heard and made heard, and a position that can be seen and made seen. Therefore, the typically liberal minimal definition of rights, currently hegemonic, does not get us very far. Also needed are the material conditions that enable us to make our voices heard and our political positions seen: public media should be precisely these means or material conditions, and public space should be precisely the stage on which our political opinions can appear and be seen by everybody. Thus mere accessibility is followed by a second requirement: the criterion of visibility. 'Public visibility' describes a condition: the existence of a space in which one's voice can be heard and one's political position – one's public opinion as opposed to a 'merely private' opinion – can be perceived.

A Space of Conflict

The need for public visibility is followed immediately by a third condition, for a space in which the most diverse political opinions and standpoints are staged is, inevitably, a space of conflict. To discuss public space in a meaningful way is to discuss 'conflictuality'. Only a space in which a single opinion exists can be a space without conflict. As soon as diverse and incompatible opinions appear, they enter into a conflictive relationship. Again, if we look at public broadcasting, we never encounter a real conflict; what we encounter is the simulacrum of conflict. This has to do with the formatting of TV or radio debates, but on a more fundamental level it also has to do with the role and function of public media as machines or apparatuses for the production and reproduction of a given hegemony. As Stuart Hall, among others, has shown, public media have to present themselves in the mode of 'objectivity', which is another name for consensus. Of course, objectivity is a fiction, but it is the fiction public media have to produce on a daily basis in order to legitimate themselves, as well as to legitimate the dominant hegemonic formation (the 'way things are' here, in our corner of the world). In cases of social conflict, public media thus have to take a seemingly objective or neutral stance vis-à-vis all conflicting parties. They have to search for a consensual position, and if it cannot be found, they have to produce one. [3]

In order to understand the role of public media, it is absolutely imperative to investigate how public consent and consensus are established – or fail to be established on certain occasions. The name for the establishment of consensus and consent, since Gramsci, is 'hegemony'. Hegemony is the ideological cement, as it were, that binds the ruling classes together in a hegemonic block. The material of which such cement consists is discourse. It is in and through discourse that hegemony is established, and the most important machines or apparatuses that construct and reproduce hegemony are the media. And the more those media appear to be objective and neutral, the better they can do their job of constructing and reproducing consensus. [4]

Herein we might encounter the main reason why the aforementioned criteria and conditions for publicness are seldom met by so-called public media. Were they to be implemented, they would certainly threaten the role and function of these hegemony machines and, thus, of the dominant hegemonic formation. This is the reason why conflict and antagonism are not allowed to reappear within public media. Why does the state not open up public media in terms of accessibility and conflict? Why are public media not simply turned into public places in the strict sense? The questions may sound naive, but the answers, I hope, are not. In the moment of conflict – if conflict is allowed to enter public media, thus making them truly public – the state immediately encounters the danger of state media turning into counter-media. By allowing conflict and antagonism to unfold, an open-ended play is set in motion whose outcome remains undecided. This is precisely what the political is about. As soon as a truly political process unfolds around a certain conflict, you cannot determine in advance what the outcome will be and which side will be the winner. This is the reason why state media have to produce consent and not conflict: because the political in the strict sense – conflict – must not surface. It has to be kept at bay, neutralized by the impression of consensus and objectivity. For the same reason, the role and function of public media are to depoliticize the political. Whenever conflict – a strike, a demonstration, an uproar, a revolt – appears, public media have to give official, consensual and 'objective' meaning to it; and if such meaning is not readily available, they have to construct it.

Antagonism

A review of the first part of the essay shows that accessibility, visibility and conflict are necessary criteria or preconditions for the emergence of public space, and it is possible, of course, to find additional criteria. At this point I want to claim that all imaginable criteria,

including accessibility and visibility, are in fact secondary to the necessity for conflict. Unlike those Habermasian liberals who think the definitive criterion for publicness is rationality – expressed in the form of undisturbed rational deliberation – I am claiming that it is not rationality but conflict and that public space in the strict sense emerges wherever a conflict breaks out. The implication is that public space does not have a definite place, and that public media are far from being such a location. Rather, conflict looks for and creates its own location, which can be anywhere. For this admittedly rather strong notion of conflict, I have borrowed a term used by Laclau and Mouffe: antagonism.[5] The priority of antagonism over other criteria, such as accessibility and visibility, becomes quite evident when one observes that when real social conflict breaks out, people link up with one side or the other, thus widening the space in which such conflict appears. Take revolution, for example, certainly the most dramatic and radical form of social antagonism. A revolution takes place in public or rather creates a public of its own, along with newly accessible public space in which people can participate. The streets, formerly an urban space reserved for traffic, are transformed into a political stage: a public space in the strict sense. Simultaneously, opinions formerly suppressed may become visible; voices formerly silenced may become heard. But in a stronger sense, something more fundamental becomes visible: the fact that things can be changed, that consensus can vanish and that consent can disappear. In other words, it becomes apparent that no hegemonic formation is eternal and that every hegemonic formation constitutes, in the manner of the 'information society', 'a terrain that is sustained and divided by social antagonisms and constantly reshaped by hegemonic struggles'.

This awareness leads to important conclusions with respect to our understanding of public media and all things related to public media. If true publicness emerges in the presence of antagonism – and only in the presence of antagonism – it follows that media can be called 'public' only when they allow for the emergence of conflict within their institutional structure. Wouldn't truly democratic media have to allow for the possibility of contestation, for the possibility of putting into question the established consensus? Isn't democracy – contrary to what Habermas may think – simply unperceivable without the possibility of conflict and antagonism? If the answer is yes, how do we envisage democratic public media? And, an even more pressing question, how can we invent strategies to democratize the media?

Part II: The People and Radical Democracy

The picture I've painted is not as bleak as it may seem at first glance, precisely because hegemony is always a contested terrain and because no hegemonic block is in total control of popular consent. For the same reason, there are always strategies available for undermining hegemonic consensus and creating some form of counter-hegemony. What I would like to propose are a couple of strategies for creating counter-public spaces within and outside so-called public media. Yet, as I see it, it is absolutely necessary to proceed from the correct starting point, politically speaking, for if these strategies are to be in the least bit successful and to have some sort of political effect, they have to be located within the democratic hypothesis. They have to be democratic, or rather radically democratic. We get nowhere by clinging to an obsolete idea of a completely different political position – revolutionary, pseudo-communist or whatever – outside the democratic realm established by the French Revolution. Emancipatory strategies today, if they are to be successful, have to expand, deepen and perhaps radicalize the democratic realm, but not dismantle or depart from it altogether (as theorists like SlavojŽižek, for instance, are currently proposing from a sort of neo-Leninist stance). This does not mean that we have to submit to the hegemonic consensus of existing liberal-democratic regimes. Instead, we have to counter the minimal definition of democracy – as a minimal institutional framework that includes a free-market economy – with a maximal definition and a project aimed at radical democracy.

Before describing a radical democratic media policy and the role of public media in a project aimed at radical democracy, I want to point out that a genuine radicalization of the democratic realm requires, in a sense, a reinstatement of the democratic sovereign. That is to say, we have to put the question of popular sovereignty back on the agenda, because this is what democracy is all about. To put it bluntly, we have to talk about the role of 'the people' in democracy – in much the same way that we have to put 'the people' between quotation marks – because their role has no substance or essence prior to democracy's construction. As we cannot dwell on the consequences of this act for political theory, let me simply state the consequences for media theory. One quite revealing fact is that the etymological roots of the term 'public' are systematically neglected. Where does the meaning of the Latin adjective *publicus* – the source of all English terms derived from that root, such as 'public space', 'the public' or even 'publicity' – come from? The answer is that *publicus* derives from *populus*, Latin for 'the people'. We have become wholly oblivious to the original connection between 'the public' and 'the people'. In thinking of public media today, we have completely lost sight of 'the people', except as a phantasmal entity: a mere number to be counted in the form of audience ratings.

This is the pseudo-democracy of the market, where we encounter not 'the people' but 'the consumer'. And the field in which consumers operate is not the public, in the political sense of the term, but publicity. Within a dominant hegemony, 'the people' is redefined as a market subject. We encounter this development throughout society, but, most devastatingly, it spills back from the market into the political field proper, where suddenly the subject of politics is redefined as the market subject of the consumer who is free to make a choice among various products (political parties, for example) which ultimately turn out to be nearly identical. Thus we are left with a choice that makes no difference – an entirely apolitical choice – as politics begins, and begins precisely, where a decision is taken which in actual fact *does* make a difference. The media discourse on audience ratings is perfectly compatible if not complicit with this larger hegemonic process of redefining what counts as the sovereign in democracy, which is 'the people', along with the basic options available to the people for actualizing this state of sovereignty. As soon as we are left with a choice that makes no real difference, we are left with no choice at all, and thus without the capacity to act either politically or publicly.

Media of the People

If it is correct that our current idea of the public – in the sense of publicity – does not include the people (except in terms of audience ratings and, perhaps, talk shows), we have arrived, conversely, at a positive feature – or, if you wish, a positive principle or slogan – of a radical democratic media policy: 'public' derives from 'the people', thus public media must be the media of the people, not the media of the state or the ruling block.

But what does this mean in practice? Obviously, the last thing we want to do is to give a *völkisch* meaning to 'the people'. Hence, 'the people' is not a substance in the ethnic sense. This would be the totalitarian meaning of 'the people', and obviously we do not need an ethnicized form of publicness. The democratic conception of 'the people' is entirely different, because it does not assume that 'the people' is a predetermined body capable of being found in empirical reality. (Nor is 'the public' a predetermined body.) In democracy, 'the people' is de-substantialized and remains present only in two forms, both of which are highly important for a radical democratic project. The first form or meaning in which 'the people' remains present in democracy is the citizen, which evokes an image of market squares in ancient civilizations, where citizens gathered, freely and equally, to debate public affairs. The second meaning to be kept in mind is the social meaning of 'the people' as the underclass – as those excluded from the public domain. In the 19th century, from a socialist standpoint, this part of the population was perceived mainly as the working classes. Today we know that many more groups are excluded from public, political and social participation, such as the jobless, immigrants and *sans papiers*. 'The people', in the

sense of the excluded, refers to those who are reduced to silence, who have no voice. A public space that does not grant accessibility and visibility to these groups is not a public space in any meaningful sense. Therefore, an understanding of public space as a space for 'the people' and of 'the people' has to be reinvigorated, or reinvented. A radical democratic project must seek to establish a counter-hegemony around a notion of 'the people' as both the citizens and the excluded, while the dominant hegemony defining 'the people' as the consumers, or as a nationalist or ethnic entity, has to be confronted.

Public media can be made public only if we engage in a hegemonic struggle as described here. It is not enough to have a good media policy; we need a good political policy. In other words, public media can be transformed into public spaces only when the transformation is part of a larger political project encompassing other political fields, such as social policies, economic policies, educational policies and so forth. Any effort made to democratize the media must take part within a larger effort to democratize society; otherwise it will not be successful.

Democratic Counter-Hegemony

But how to construct such a radical democratic counter-hegemony? Obviously, this is a difficult and protracted process which would have to take place on a multiplicity of levels and within a multiplicity of social fields. It would have to include the democratization of schools and other educational institutions, as well as the democratization of the workplace. And it would include, of course, the democratization of the media. In order to implement this process, we must confront the dominant hegemonic block at its ideological level: that is, at the level of consensus. It is at this level that a political or hegemonic struggle rages over the question as to what counts and does not count as legitimate in society. One has to confront the dominant hegemonic block on this legitimatory ground – on the field of legitimation – and to redefine what counts as legitimate policy. Involved in this type of confrontation is a struggle over concepts and words. Take the notion of efficiency. Today, previous democratic achievements are being demolished throughout society in the name of economic efficiency. Universities, for instance, which had already been democratized in the 70s to some degree, are being handed over to the market and to the imperative of economic efficiency. A counter-hegemonic struggle would not necessarily deny the need for an 'efficient' policy, but it would transform the meaning of the term; it would change what counts as efficient. Why not count as efficient those policies that deepen and radicalize democracy by increasing, for instance, accessibility to certain institutions? Such a move would re-legitimate or re-define the criteria by which state subsidies are allocated to certain institutions. Then, only those institutions that work efficiently in the sense of fostering and deepening democratic participation could legitimately claim state money. This is a particularly important argument with respect to cultural policies, an area in which the role of many independent cultural institutions is constantly threatened and in need of self-legitimation if these institutions are to be subsidized. If democratic efficiency were to be made a general principle of cultural policy, state subsidies would no longer be fed into the entertainment industry, for instance, or into representational forms of bourgeois culture, but only into those institutions which in actual fact contribute to the creation of a democratic public.

Distribution of Public Funds

Although my proposals may sound rather utopian, they are not, as this radical democratic programme does not have to be implemented full scale. Of course, if it were to be implemented full scale, it would amount to the total destruction (and subsequent reconstruction) of public broadcasting as we know it. But I do not envision the state's main tv station handing over all Saturday evening primetime slots to 'the people'. Far more realistic is to force public media, by law, to open and hand over parts of their means of production to the wider public, thus allowing for the creation of democratic media platforms. In addition, if the main legitimatory goal of public policies is to democratize as many social areas as possible, including public media, a logical result is the reallocation of public funds. Currently, public broadcasting in many European countries is subsidized by audience fees. Now, if for some reason public media will not relinquish access to their radio or television frequencies and to their means of production – the most likely situation in the near future – part of the money derived from audience fees will have to go to those media within civil society which in actual fact do provide the institutional framework necessary for public spaces to emerge. These fees will have to be reallocated to alternative and democratic media institutions.

All such measures and media policies, and one can imagine many more, are in fact premised on a change in political hegemony. Hence they involve a larger and no doubt protracted process of politicization/democratization of society in which the democratization of the media will play a particular and perhaps central part, but certainly not the only part. It is necessary to modify the consensus of opinion regarding what counts as legitimate. As long as the (symbolic) majority thinks it is legitimate for taxpayers' money to go into public institutions if, and only if, such institutions succumb to the imperative of economic efficiency, the task of democratizing them will be immensely difficult. For this reason, the hegemonic struggle does not start within these institutions (in order to reform them from within). It starts within the minds of the people. This is why a new democratic consensus, a new democratic hegemony, has to be established.

In conclusion, eight essential points:

1. In terms of legitimacy, public media can be called public only to the extent that they are accessible to 'the people' and allow a space of conflict to emerge.

2. Only those media that are truly public, as defined in Point 1, can be called democratic.

3. Given these criteria, public media as we know them – that is to say, public media within our existing liberal-democratic regimes – are neither public nor democratic.

4. It follows that, from a democratic point of view, public media have to be 'made public' through a process of democratization.

5. In order to democratize the media, we have to democratize democracy; in other words, we have to radicalize and deepen the democratic realm. We can call this project 'radical democracy'.

6. The democratization of the media is a cornerstone of any radical democratic programme, because democracy occurs only where there is public space; and, among other places in society, public media have the material and institutional infrastructure to provide the conditions for public space to emerge.

7. The democratization of public media can succeed only if this process is part of a larger hegemonic struggle. The radicalization of democracy at all levels involves both a change in the way people envisage their lives within society and the construction of a new counter-

hegemonic consensus.

8. Last but not least, the struggle for truly democratic public media is not a question of media policy. If we leave it to technocrats, bureaucrats or media consultants to invent new media policies, nothing will change. For radical democracy is not about inventing a new policy but about inventing new politics – and inventing politics anew.

Oliver Marchart (AUS) teaches in the Sociology department at the University of Lucerne. His recent books include *Post-foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (2007)*, Neu beginnen. Hannah Arendt, die Revolution und die Globalisierung* (2005)*. Ästhetik des Öffentlichen. Eine politische Theorie künstlerischer Praxis* (2008) is due to be published shortly.

Footnotes

1. Jakob Torfing: *New Theories of Discourse: Laclau, Mouffe and Žižek* (Oxford/Malden: Blackwell, 1999), 211.
2. Oliver Marchart: 'Media Darkness: Reflections on Public Space, Light and Conflict', in: Tatiana Goryucheva and Eric Kluitenberg. (eds.), *Media/Art/Public Domain* (Amsterdam: De Balie, Centre for Culture and Politics, 2003), 83-97; electronically available at http://www.debalie.nl/artikel.jsp?podiumid=media&articleid=19694.
3. Let us take the infamous example of reports on German television, public and private, concerning Schröder's so-called social reforms. To call these policies - which are not only a German phenomenon, of course - 'reforms' is, as we all know, a euphiistic way to speak about the dismantling and thorough destruction of the welfare state. In political talk shows on German tv, you will not find a single topic rehearsed more frequently than these reforms. Obviously, German television has to rehearse the topic in a seiingly objective and neutral fashion. But what does this mean in practice? If you analyse a talk show like that of Sabine Christiansen, where the so-called reforms were discussed on a nearly weekly basis, initially you see that the pros and cons are given space, and that guests both defend and attack the reforms. A closer look, however, immediately reveals the presence of significantly more defenders than opponents of these reforms (in most cases, not one opponent even questions their necessity). If, for instance, six politicians or experts have been invited to debate the issues, at least five of thi adhere to the hegionic discourse or *doxa*, which basically says that one may disagree about the speed and scope of the so-called reforms but not about the urgent need to reform (read: to slowly but steadily dismantle) the welfare state. In order to go on constructing the fiction of objectivity, a single guest, most often a miber of a labour union, presents a slightly different view. In most cases, however, he or she still subscribes to the assumed necessity for reforms. At no point in the discourse is the dominant hegionic horizon that forms the backdrop of the debate put into question. This is somewhat surprising, because as these debates are taking place the discourse on the supposed urgency and inevitability of reforms has been promoted - and partly put into policies - for about 20 years. Nearly the entire published opinion of all mainstream media - electronic as well as print media - agrees on this point, and yet the people - more on 'the people' in a moment - stubbornly disagree. All opinion polls show that the people are less than convinced of the supposed necessity of robbing thi of all the achievients of the welfare state. Although every conflict concerning this question has been effectively banned from the public media, it riains impossible for the dominant hegiony to establish a consensus ***outside*** the media and publicized opinion. As far as I can see, no political topic exists in which publicized opinion differs more significantly from common sense, or the opinion in the street.
4. This point has been made by Stuart Hall in his article: 'The rediscovery of "ideology": return of the repressed in media studies', in Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran and Janet Wollacott (eds.), *Culture, Society and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1982).
5. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe: *Hegiony and Socialist Strategy* (London/New York: Verso, 1985).

Tags

Democracy, Media Society, Public Domain