

## Rethinking media pluralism and communicative abundance

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### Abstract

This article surveys different arguments about shifts in the distribution of communicative power, which new media have given rise to, and analyzes their consequences for the notion of media pluralism as an analytic and normative concept. To be useful in the contemporary media landscape, the article argues that media pluralism should be understood more broadly in terms of the media's role in the distribution of communicative power in the public sphere rather than in terms of media ownership or consumer choice only.

### Introduction

The concepts of media pluralism and diversity are at the heart of the contemporary debates on media and democracy in both academic theories and media policy. Yet it seems almost ironic that they enjoy such prominence as media policy values at the time of unprecedented proliferation of communication channels. In contrast to long-standing concerns over homogenization of content and concentration of media power, many accounts of the contemporary media environment present an image of almost infinite choice and an unparalleled pluralization of voices that have access to the public sphere. Media scholars have characterized the contemporary media environment with terms, such as the "age of plenty" (Ellis, 2002), "communicative abundance" (Keane, 1999), "supersaturation" (Gitlin, 2002), or "cultural chaos" (McNair, 2006).

Visions of communicative abundance often entail a claim that the traditional analytic, normative and regulatory frameworks of media policy have become increasingly obsolete. Accordingly, with nearly infinite range of information available online, concerns for pluralism and diversity in particular appear to have become not only increasingly contested but, for some, analytically obsolete or anachronistic. In what sense is it then meaningful to speak of media pluralism when our media environments are characterized more by abundance than scarcity?

Historically, the debate on media pluralism and diversity has largely been premised on the idea that the media act as powerful intermediaries or gatekeepers of public communication flows. It is this role that obviously makes it crucial to interrogate the openness of media systems to different voices, ideas and interests in society. As Stefaan Verhulst (2007, p. 117) puts it, the fact of scarcity imposes power; because

of scarcity, those intermediaries that control the markets are in a privileged position to exercise power and shape the public opinion.

However, with the shift to demand and search driven media environment, the new media are seen to shift control over communication toward individual users as the audiences can increasingly filter and personalise information and choose how, when, and where communication is received. For some, the expansion of choice and participatory potential brings about not only the end of scarcity but also the end of powerful intermediaries and gatekeepers. In this sense, the new modes of public communication that the Internet enables seem to fulfil the promise of greater interchange and feedback between media institutions and citizens that many of the normative theories of the public sphere have emphasised, without much need for any kind of regulation or public intervention.

According to the enthusiasts, the Internet will inevitably break up the concentrated media power and lay the foundation for "diversity, accessibility and affordability" (Compaine and Gomery, 2000, pp. 575). At the very least, as Williams and Delli Carpini (2004) argue, the new media environment disrupts the traditional "single axis system" of political influence and creates a fluid "multi-axity" of power, which creates new opportunities for non-mainstream political actors to influence the setting and framing of the political agenda.

On the other hand, there are skeptical voices that remind, as Mattelaart (2003, p. 23) does that "each new generation revives the 'redemptive discourse' of liberating effects of new communication technology, only to be disappointed when old hierarchies of power prove to persist". To support this view, there is now considerable evidence that contrary to popular belief, the Internet has not fundamentally changed the concentrated structure typical of mass media, but has actually brought about new forms of exclusion and hierarchy (e.g. Hindman, 2008). Then, finally, there are those who argue that the problem of today is that there is essentially too much diversity; that it is precisely the individualization and fragmentation of media use that is making publicly accountable regulation and general interest media more relevant than ever before (Sunstein, 2007).

In short, there is little consensus on whether the technological and socio-cultural changes in the contemporary media environment have actually led to a meaningful plurality of voices and whether there is more or less diversity than before. Instead, much of the debate on the implications of the Internet for media pluralism is characterized by a tension between a fascination with the new technologies as furthering democracy and a critical view that highlights the importance of enduring power structures and hierarchies. The purpose of this article is to survey some of the commonly made claims about shifts in the dynamics of media and the distribution of communicative power, which the new media has given rise to, and to analyze their consequences for the notion of media pluralism as a normative concept.

### **From ideological control to cultural chaos**

It has become commonplace in both academic and policy discourse to celebrate the digital media as a tool that inevitably leads toward democratization and pluralization of the public sphere and to the emergence of various grass-roots civil society activities.

Manuel Castells (2007), for instance, argues that the development of interactive, horizontal networks of communication has induced the rise of a new form of communication, which he calls "mass self-communication". While the communication system of the industrial society was centered on the mass media, characterized by distribution of a one-way message from one to many, the communication foundation of the network society is the global web of horizontal communication networks that include multimodal exchange of interactive messages from many to many. For Castells, this essentially opens up an unlimited diversity of autonomous communication flows and an unparalleled opportunity for insurgent political and social movements to intervene in the new communication space. To support these claims, Castells cites the exponential growth in the number of blogs, autonomous communication networks, new social movements, and alternative media that are largely organized in the Internet.

For media sociologist Brian McNair (2006, p. 10) these same changes have led to three interlinked developments: (1) an exponential increase in journalistic and other forms of information available to citizens, (2) dissolution of spatial, cultural and social boundaries both globally and within national-states, and (3) erosion of taste hierarchies used to police cultural consumption. These can all be seen to represent above all a radical diversification and decentralization, even democratization of cultural production. As McNair (2006, p. vii) puts it, they have produced a shift from ideological control to a cultural chaos, which has radically increased the possibilities "for dissent, openness and diversity rather than closure, exclusivity and ideological homogeneity".

Both these visions exemplify a broader argument about a fundamental shift in the dynamics of public communication and the public sphere from uniformity and control towards plurality and even anarchy. According to these and many other writers, new information and communication technologies above all disrupt the traditional elite control of media, and amplify the political voice of non-elites. The new participatory and decentralized modes of public communication allow citizens to compete with journalists for the creation and dissemination of political information, which breaks the power of traditional elites to control what is considered news. As Richard Rogers (2004) puts it, the Internet has become a collision space for official and unofficial accounts of reality. Ranging from alternative health information to social movements' challenge to official politics, it tends to unsettle and challenge the highly mediated versioning

of reality of mainstream news and official communication strategies by engendering a new culture of dissent (Rogers, 2004, p. 163).

Besides technological developments, the arguments for greater diversity of contemporary media environment can also be couched in wider socio-cultural developments. According to Ellis (2002), the shift from the era of scarcity, when the media tended to build social consensus, to an "era of plenty" reflects not only changes in communication technologies but also broader socio-cultural trends of individualization and pluralization. As the era of mass market for standardized goods has given way for a market of differentiated products for more fragmented consumers, the logic of differentiation between social groups and individuals has also changed and the media market itself is increasingly engaged in the project of producing and giving significance to various differences. It can be argued that an ever more differentiated and targeted communications market will produce more and more differentiation between people (Ellis, 2002, p. 63-66).

For many, this is above all an emancipating development that broadens the opportunities available for citizens and breaks the paternalism and elitism associated with the old era of scarcity and unitary culture. As McNair (2006, p. 100) states: "There is meaningful (rather than tokenistic) plurality of voices within contemporary cultural capitalism. ... It is beyond dispute that the system can accommodate and give mainstream visibility to a more diverse, broader range of opinion." Contrary to critical media scholars that he criticizes, McNair adds that this has happened because, not despite, the commodification of culture. In other words, dissent and counter-culture are thought to be inherent to the very logic of contemporary cultural capitalism, not something that needs to be protected from it.

Consequently, it has become almost a truism that there has been a shift from few speakers and many listeners to a greater number of active participants and new communicative forms bringing a much wider spectrum of views to publicity. Even more importantly for the debates on media pluralism, the Internet is commonly thought to redistribute political influence and make the public sphere more inclusive to the political voice of ordinary citizens (Hindman 2008, 6).

This narrative of diversification through technological and market developments has also been influential in communication policy, where the democratizing effects of the new media have often been used to justify looser regulation of the old media. Many writers have suggested that government regulation to achieve engineered pluralism will no longer be necessary since the monolithic empires of mass media are dissolving anyway. As Nicholas Negroponte (1996, p. 57-58) famously argued in one of the early prophecies of digital revolution: "The combined forces of technology and human nature will ultimately take a stronger hand in plurality than any laws Congress can invent."

Similarly, when the American regulator FCC proposed in 2003 to relax the rules on media ownership, it argued that citizens today "have more media choices, more sources of news and information, and more varied entertainment programming available to them than ever before ... and, via the Internet, Americans can access virtually any information, anywhere, on any topic." (FCC, 2003, point 3). Yet "ownership rules, like a distant echo from the past, continue to restrict who may hold radio and television licenses as if broadcasters were America's information gatekeepers." (ibid., point 4).

Proliferation of channels, coupled with the capacity of audiences to actively interpret the media, thus seem to challenge many of the assumptions behind public regulation of the media. The Internet, as an epitome of the "combined forces of technology and human nature", allows people to communicate over borders, to consume the growing amount of information and entertainment available, and to participate in the multiple participatory platforms and applications. All these developments, which have seemingly emerged without any planning or regulatory intervention, thus question the legitimacy of institutions like public service media, state subsidies, or other interventionist means to support media pluralism.

### **Enduring asymmetries of power**

The relevance of current technological developments is hard to dismiss and it seems unarguable that some communication technologies have the capacity to support more diversity and pluralism than others. Yet the assumption that the Internet and other new technologies would have solved all concerns related to media pluralism and diversity is misguided in some very obvious ways. In contrast to the more enthusiastic visions, many activists and academics have recently pointed to growing concerns regarding new hierarchies of power and new forms of concentration that are specific to the new media. Thus, there are many who claim that the new media environment only further privileges corporate interests, marginalizes alternative voices and leads toward continued consolidation of media power.

In general, it can be argued that the disparities in the possibilities offered by new media largely reflect the previously recognized socio-economic inequalities. Hence, the critics are right to argue that behind the veil of a multitude of resistances and critiques, we should also acknowledge the shape of certain "unmoved movers" (Suoranta & Vadén 2008, p. 1, 151). As Nicholas Garnham (1999b) notes, patterns of power distribution historically change slowly, rarely and with difficulty – so it is safe to assume that the new technologies alone are unlikely to be either as new or as dramatic in their impact, for good or ill, as the technologically focused approaches assume.

There is no shortage of critical perspectives in both public debate and academic domain that see the old and new media alike as offering ever more homogenized supply of market-driven entertainment and consumer culture. For these “more of the same” critics, the proliferation of media only encourages the tendency to follow the lowest common denominator and replicate standardized success-recipes over and over, thereby homogenizing the supply even more. Despite the proliferation of various niche media, it can also be argued that the rise of the Internet and the demands of real-time news has only diminished the resources available for ambitious journalism and made mainstream news organisations increasingly reliant on established sources and routines (Fenton 2009). Despite all the diversity, plenitude and complexity, concerns for concentration of power and homogenisation of content have thus not disappeared.

What most critical concerns share is the view that the diversity of options itself is not the only indicator of genuine pluralism, for it says nothing of the inherent hierarchies and relations of power within the media. In spite of claims about user-generated content, there is still a fundamental asymmetry between media producers and consumers. Questions about how media production is organized and what shapes its output thus remain crucial issues for critical media research.

Aside from the continuing importance of existing institutional structures, the argument that new media technologies somehow autonomously, and without a need for regulation, develop in a more democratic and pluralistic direction is also easily questioned. The fact that the capacity of states to guide the direction of technological development is undermined hardly means that “technological forces and human nature” somehow automatically lead to harmony and inevitable democratization.

It is common to think of the Internet in particular as something unruly, ungovernable, and characterized by openness and an absence of control. Yet, in reality, the Internet raises a wide range of communication policy issues that are not only technical but also profoundly political. Regulatory mechanisms of various sorts are also being put in place all the time, and like all other communication technologies, uses of the Internet are shaped by different political, social and economic interests and managed by different powers (see Braman, 2004). Contrary to the rhetoric of autonomous technological progress, these mechanisms - many of them informal and outside the scope of democratic accountability - continue to shape the media and their development. The control over information flows and use has thus become an even more effective form of power. This applies to many familiar topics like media ownership but also areas that are little understood. For instance, design choices in the network architecture, copyright rules, software codes, net neutrality, and other forms of information politics still largely determine the way information is made available and who can speak to whom under what condition.

Decisions about standards or protocols made within Internet governance forums and above all within and between corporations can have lasting influence on media pluralism, even if they are not necessarily

recognized as sites of media policy as such. Media regulation, in various forms, is thus no less important than before, but it must be based on a new set of premises and arguments that take into account the new situation of media abundance and the policy problems it raises.

Factors like ownership and control of the media as well as unequal access to communication systems ensure that communicative abundance will not end questions about the unequal distribution of communicative power. The increase in amount of information available has not brought about harmony, transparency or unrestricted communication. Instead, it has created new controversies about unequal distribution of and restricted access to the means of communication. As John Keane (1999, p. 6) puts it, rather than being automatically solved, disagreements about "who gets, what, when, and how" actually multiply.

### **Concentration online**

Instead of overarching judgements about the value of technology itself, there is a need to consider more analytically the opportunities and obstacles that the new media involve. First of all, even if the Internet provides almost infinite diversity of voices in principle, it does not mean that all of this is equally accessible to the majority of the public. Factors here include not only technical obstacles, but also lack of skills or resources to find less prominent content, and the structural power of new gatekeepers and content aggregators to influence what contents are most easily accessible to the Internet users. As many observers have warned, certain logics and practices of information politics are taking the web away from its public spiritedness, leading to information exposure not in keeping with the principles of pluralism of viewpoints or collision of different accounts of reality (Rogers, 2004, p. 164; Dahlberg, 2005). Old hierarchies regarding ownership and control of media endure, but in addition there are also new forms of domination and concentration that are only beginning to emerge. These create a need to critically reflect on the diversity made possible by the new media, its limits, and the nature of the barriers that still persist. The most basic obstacle, of course, is that all do not have access to these new forms of media. But even if one leaves aside questions of unequal access and digital divide, which themselves are complex and multi-layered enough, there are number of other reasons to criticize the argument that the Internet will democratize the media by giving ordinary citizens the ability to compete in the marketplace of ideas against media corporations and political elites.

One thing that is only starting to be recognized is that online media too has its own forms of concentrations and hierarchies that in some ways even surpass those in traditional media. In the

networked online media, space may be unlimited but other resources like time, money and attention are not. Even if the technology is there for anyone to publish, resources required to produce attractive content remain high. Instead, the battles over the attention of audiences and the ownership of information have only intensified. Matthew Hindman (2008), for instance, argues in a recent book that the Internet has done little to broaden political discourse but in fact empowers a small set of elites – some new, but most familiar. While the Internet has increased some forms of political participation, elites still strongly shape how political material on the Internet is presented and accessed.

The competition among sources for the privilege of providing authoritative information also continues to involve gatekeepers of various sorts. The nature of media commodities as a public good means that corporations are forced to devise strategies, such as digital rights management, to transform public into private goods and introduce new monopolies and new forms of scarcity throughout the media value chain. As Nicholas Garnham (2000, p. 58) argues, concentration is an inherent tendency of media markets for the economic survival of media companies depends upon the exploitation of scarcity. Since the business model of large content-producing corporations is based on the scarcity of content, which the new technologies have the potential of removing, it is in the interest of media corporations to create mechanisms of artificial scarcity and erect barriers to the abundance of digital content (see also Suoranta & Vaden, 2008, p. 53).

Many commentators have taken it for granted that the Internet diffuses the attention of the public away from the mainstream media outlets, toward more diversified sources. Some have viewed this positively, while others have worried that it would lead to the fragmentation of public discourse as people would only be exposed to ideas that fit their pre-existing dispositions (Sunstein, 2007). Contrary to these assumptions, however, attention still tends to concentrate into a limited number of sources, which are often dominated by traditional mainstream media. Availability does not necessarily mean more diversified media use, as much of Internet content comes from already established suppliers of media content, and the bulk of the most popular sites remain in the hands of the same entities that dominate other media. As a consequence, Edwin Baker (2007, 112) argues, "it does not appear that the Internet operates to substantially equalize influence among media entities: the number that dominate, that is, get the largest audience share, are even fewer than in the prior, exclusively offline world."

Even more troublingly, it has also been argued that the digital media reduce the likelihood of user exposure to unsought, but ultimately valuable media experiences (Goodman 2004, 1394). As Hindman shows, the Internet traffic follows an extreme winners-take-all pattern. Relying on portals, link structure and search engines, most people are directed to a few successful sites, while the rest remain invisible to the majority of users. Despite the wealth of independent web sites, online news audience is thus



concentrated on very few outlets while blogs, for instance, receive only a miniscule portion of Internet traffic. Using the methods of empirical diversity assessment, Hindman concludes that although the Internet greatly expands the amount of information sources people can choose from, in practice the structure of the medium creates a high degree of concentration of content among a small handful of sites<sup>1</sup>. For Hindman (2008), online audience concentration thus equals or even exceeds that found in most traditional media; citizens seem to cluster around top few information sources in any given category, while "most online content receives no links, attracts no eyeballs, and has minimal political relevance" (*ibid.*, p. 18). In terms of exposure diversity, the impact of the Internet thus seems highly controversial.

One increasingly recognized issue is the rising structural power of Internet search engines and their influence in determining what users worldwide can see and do online. The growth of available content makes the selection and mediation of relevant contents increasingly crucial, and to a large degree this function at the interface between public and individual communication is assumed by search engines and portals. In effect, they therefore perform a function similar to that of the traditional gatekeepers that effectively preselect the information available for users (Hargittai, 2007; Hindman, 2008; Machill et al, 2008). On the one hand, search engines are mediators that mirror the power of existing institutions and social structures. On the other hand, they are also new gatekeepers themselves with autonomous influence in directing web traffic (Hindman, 2008, p. 80). With most visited pages ranked first, Hindman argues that the search engine's logic essentially reinforces the trend toward consolidation. Popular sites become even more popular, while obscure sites recede even further into the ether. Factors such as search engines and the link structure of the Internet are thus critical in determining what citizens see online, and they also explain the predominance of one or two sites in almost every category of online information (Hindman, 2008, p. 14-15).

Another concept that is often raised to criticize expanding corporate media power over the Internet is the notion of enclosure (e.g. Castells, 2009, p. 105-8; Dahlberg, 2005). This basically refers to restrictions on media content and the controlling of media uses, and it includes issues such as subscription services, absence of external links, lack of interoperability, and software tie-ins, and other means of building walls around content by technical or economic means. In this sense, the notion of intellectual property also functions largely as a scarcity-producer as it commodifies content by creating means and the ideological will to treat digital content as commodities (Suoranta & Vadén, 2008, p. 67). Commercial actors, in particular, are increasingly seen to promote enclosure in ways that go against the ideal of open and unconstrained exchange of information typically associated with the Internet. This means, for instance,

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics cited by Hindman report that in the US the top 10 web sites account for 29 % of all web traffic, which is more than the audience share of top 10 newspapers, magazines or radio stations in their respective media (Hindman, 2008, p. 93). Similarly, Baker (2007, 112) shows that top blogs have almost 80 times the visits as the 100th ranked blog.

that companies behind the portals which dominate online do their best to build walls around their sites, or construct virtual colonies by providing links only to other sites the company controls (Dahlberg, 2005, p. 163, 168). Similarly, many citizens' portals that are run by governments have also adopted similar means by controlling the format of contributions and disallowing external links (Rogers, 2004, p. 11-12).

All in all, apart from the power of existing media conglomerates, there are new forms of concentration and control emerging also in the Internet. While many observers have claimed that the Internet's most important political impacts come from the elimination of old media gatekeepers, much of the recent Internet research has shown that commercial web sites and search engines, for example, play an increasingly important role in filtering information. These include both new types of structural concentrations like bottlenecks controlled by providers and new forms of exclusion that are due to media literacy. As Verhulst (2007, p. 121) argues, although new technologies have altered the role of the media, instead of the end of scarcity new technologies simply introduce new forms of scarcity. New intermediaries find new ways of controlling the flow of information, shaping the way people find information, and thus dominating the battle for attention.

All these issues remind of the danger that the new media only reproduce the structure of the traditional mass media, with time and attention becoming ever more subject to the power of money. As Verhulst (2007, p. 123) argues, "contrary to original assumptions, there is not an abundance (much less an infinity) of intermediaries today, but a segmented and fragmented market where the concentration of ownership and patterns of access appear very similar to the old market". Contrary to the claims about the elimination of old media gatekeepers, gates and gatekeepers thus remain a critical part of the information landscape. Some ways in which online information is filtered are familiar, and due to the enduring presence of old media organizations on the web, while other aspects of online filtering, such as search engines and portal sites, meta-sites and tracking systems are new and much less studied from the perspective of media pluralism.

While studies on the effects of new technologies are still contradictory in many ways, it is clear that the enormous variety of content available does not automatically encourage users to expand their media use. The argument that the Internet is a radically decentralized medium where large media outlets are unimportant or that it necessarily increases the number of information sources that people on average actually see (exposure diversity) is hardly supported by empirical evidence. There may be more diversity available for those who have the knowledge and time to search for more information beyond that selected for audiences by editors of main news sites, but not necessarily for the majority. While this may not be enough to dismiss the democratic potential of the Internet and many opportunities it offers, it makes it

obvious that many of the simplistic assumptions of what the Internet means for media pluralism must be at least reconsidered.

As Castells (2007, p. 248) notes, the growing consolidation of old and new media conglomerates does not mean that the mainstream media are completely taking over the new, autonomous forms of content generation and distribution. It means that there is a contradictory process that gives birth to a new media reality whose effects will ultimately be decided through a series of political and business power struggles. The point here is therefore not to determine whether there is more or less genuine pluralism now than there was before, and whether the Internet actually offers alternative accounts of reality. Instead, the broader point to be drawn from this is that communicative abundance alone does not make questions about the distribution of communicative power and political voice obsolete but only reconfigures them in a more complex form.

### **Fears of fragmentation and the revaluing of intermediaries**

Another fear commonly invoked in debates on the impacts of new communicative abundance regards the fragmentation of public discourse. Instead of too much concentration, some believe that the Internet provides too little. Even if the technological developments would actually diversify the uses of media, this has not been regarded only positively but it has also led to fears of extreme individualism, fragmentation and loss of common public platforms. In particular, they lead to question about the implications of the explosion of communication options for the preconditions of democratic deliberation and the public sphere. Among other things, the Internet has been criticized for eroding the quality of the public's information environment and undermining the integrative role of the media in society. As we no longer have widely shared and authoritative news media some fear that the Internet may lead to a general decline in the scope and quality of public communication. Despite having an almost unlimited array of content at their fingertips, the users of the Internet can choose to access only a narrow spectrum related to what most interests them. In the words of Cass Sunstein (2007), users can limit their own horizons by cocooning themselves in "echo chambers", in which their own personal prejudices will be reinforced rather than challenged.

These fears reflect the assumption that the proliferation of media would mean radical segmentation of the audience, where different groups, elite and mass, old and young, majorities and minorities use different media. The evidence of such developments, as well as its implications for informed citizenship, however,

are evaluated very differently: some see it as creating better possibilities for access to the public sphere and more pluralism, others see it as unhealthy "balkanization" of the public sphere.

As noted above, there is empirical evidence that increasing availability does not necessarily lead individual citizen to a more diversified media use. However, as Sunstein (2007) emphasizes, one of the most striking social consequences of new communication technologies is the growing power of consumers to filter what they see. The greater specialization allows people to increasingly avoid general interest media and make choices that reflect their existing predispositions. This creates the possibility to consciously avoid ideas that they don't like or agree with, or select material that confirms their existing beliefs and values. With people following only the sources that fit their existing predispositions, Sunstein (2007, p. 17) argues, there is danger of group polarization and a new herd mentality. Citizens can use the new power to filter information to insulate themselves in an information cocoon to systematically avoid dissenting voices, which increasingly leads to less common experiences with other citizens.

In other words, the more control we exercise over what we see and hear, the less prepared we are to be surprised (Verhulst 2007, p. 125-126). In this sense the predicted decline of general interest media that provide a range of shared, common experiences and information for the public as a whole is not only desirable. When the media market is divided into smaller and smaller segments people are arguably getting less and less exposed to competing views and unnoticed problems. Interestingly, this is in direct contradiction with the claim that the Internet somehow naturally tends to unsettle the familiar and create collisions between different versions of reality (see Rogers, 2004).

Dissenting voices are crucial to a healthy public sphere, and while blogs, for instance, have surely had some positive influence in breaking through previously ignored perspectives and occasionally providing control of mainstream media, they are commonly provided to like-minded with little quality control. According to critics like Sunstein (2003), the consequence of this is that groups of like-minded are inclined to end up in an extreme version of their view after discussing among themselves; which he has called the "law of group polarization". Regarding politics, for instance, it is possible to restrict oneself to certain points of view, by hearing only from people you like. Because of this, Markus Prior (2007), for instance, argues that increasing media choice is one of the key factors in explaining the partisan polarization in American politics.

Similar fears have been acknowledged by democratic theorists as different as Jürgen Habermas and Chantal Mouffe in their respective comments about the implications of the Internet on the public sphere. Habermas (2006, p. 422) argues that although the Internet can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes, he notes that in liberal-democratic regimes the Internet serves only to fragment focused audiences into "a huge number of isolated publics". Similarly, Mouffe notes that the new media

"perversely allows people to just live in their little worlds, and not being exposed anymore to the conflicting ideas that characterize the agonistic public space" (Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p. 968).

From the perspective of democratic theory, fragmentation and polarization thus seem distressing to the advocates of both deliberative and agonistic conceptions of the public space. According to Sunstein (2003, p. 91), while it is important to ensure such enclave public spheres for deliberation by like-minded people, it is crucial that members of the relevant groups are not isolated from the different views within society. Thus the need to maintain a well-functioning system of free expression and deliberative democracy entails at least two conclusions about media and democracy: (1) People should be exposed to materials and topics that they would not have chosen in advance, for unplanned, unanticipated encounters that involve new topics and points of view are essential for engagement between differing views and as guards against fragmentation and extremism; (2) to engage in public deliberation and to address social problems, many or most citizens should have a range of common experiences as a precursor for joint decision-making (Sunstein, 2007, p. 5-6).

Based on the evidence provided by recent studies of web traffic, fears of such fragmentation can also be questioned. As noted above, the decline of intermediaries has been at least partly exaggerated, and the Internet has arguably not lead to fragmentation, but in some cases it has even led to consolidation of attention. In this matter, the empirical evidence is still limited with relatively few studies of these new phenomena. The Internet and communicative abundance do not necessarily mean anarchy, as there are still plenty of other mechanisms that bring a measure of coherence to political life. In this sense, fears of fragmentation assume a certain technological determinism and media-centrism that ignores all other sources of commonality and solidarity in society. Furthermore, there is also often an unjustified assumption that the Internet will substitute for, rather than complement existing forms of political communication, when in reality it is probably better conceived as a functional complement to traditional mass media and face-to-face discussions.

Given critical scholars' traditional critique of mass culture and unitary public sphere, there is also a certain irony in the mass culture nostalgia that romanticizes the shared experiences produced by mass media. In light of the critiques that the unitary model of the public sphere excludes less privileged groups within society, the "enclave deliberation" of multiple smaller public spheres can also be seen to promote the development of positions that would otherwise be silenced or marginalized in the wider public sphere (see, e.g., Fraser, 1992).

Regardless of these points, the debate clearly illustrates the fact that the concerns we have about media pluralism are not only about having more or less choice. Instead, individual choices, perfectly reasonable in themselves, might produce various social difficulties. Question is, then, if media pluralism as a

normative concept should be conceptualized from the perspective of promoting informed public deliberation or consumer sovereignty in the market. If one chooses the former, as Sunstein (2003, p. 95) argues, the public sphere requires "appropriate heterogeneity", which acknowledges that while all arguments can never be heard, the public sphere is above all a domain where multiple perspectives should collide. The key precondition of this for Sunstein is the provision of full information, not only about facts but also about relevant values and political options. Similarly, Thomas Gibbons (2000, p. 308) argues that in addition to the availability of different media as an information resource, for individuals to participate fully in the democratic process, they also require guidance about the context of information and ideas and their relationships, and above all engagement between different views, opinions and policy choices.

From the perspective of democratic communication, there remains a wider problem that while it is easier than ever to create content, it's tougher than ever for that content to be seen by others. The analysis and interpretation of this self-paralyzing tendency of communicative abundance is arguably what should be an important priority in the fields of communication, politics and philosophy (Keane, 1999, p. 9).

In response to fears of audience fragmentation, there has recently been some debate about the access to public interest content as one of the key media policy challenges. Paradoxically, this has meant a new appreciation of general interest intermediaries, such as newspapers, magazines and broadcasters, and a regulatory system that maintains the role of these very institutions whose decline has been celebrated as enabling unprecedented pluralism. In addition, it has also brought about concerns about the role of new intermediaries such as search engines that increasingly determine how easily users find their way around the information abundance. While such gatekeepers may in many cases represent bottlenecks that are seen to undermine pluralism and limit access, it is also recognized that they play a critical role in ensuring security or organizing the anarchy of information in the web.

Various proposals for new public interest intermediaries have also been put forward. While Sunstein (2007, p. 193) has proposed the creation of specific "deliberative domains" that would ensure quality content and meeting of opposing viewpoints, in the European context, such functions are already strongly associated with public broadcasting systems, and increasingly it also seems to underlie the arguments that try to justify their continued importance in the digital age.

Graham Murdock, for example, has called for rethinking the functions of public service media institutions by re-situating their remit within what he calls a digital commons, "a linked space defined by its shared refusal of commercial enclosure and its commitment to free and universal access, reciprocity, and collaborative activity" (Murdock, 2005, p. 227). The central position of public service media in the digital age would then largely seem to rest on a claim that it can facilitate between a range of material and thus counter looming developments of fragmentation and enclosure of information.

In line with this, a recent study on the effect of different media systems on the level of public knowledge reported that a critical difference between public service models and market models is the greater ability of the former to engage an "inadvertent" audience: people who might be generally disinclined to follow public affairs "cannot help encountering news while awaiting delivery of their favourite entertainment programmes" (Curran et al, 2009, p. 22). Consequently, it can be argued that the public service model also minimized the knowledge gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups and thus contributes to a more egalitarian pattern of citizenship.

### **Toward a critical concept of media pluralism**

With different interpretations of current developments in media technology and markets, it's difficult to deny that some of the developments appear paradoxical. Whether one looks for new forms of emancipation or new forms of domination largely depends on the perspective. Williams and Delli Carpini (2004, p. 1209) sum up the ongoing debate when they write: "Optimistically we believe that the erosion of gatekeeping and the emergence of multiple axes of information provide new opportunities for citizens to challenge elite control of political issues. Pessimistically we are skeptical of the ability of ordinary citizens to make use of these opportunities and suspicious of the degree to which even multiple axes of power are still shaped by more fundamental structures of economic and political power."

It seems that the tendencies of pluralization on the one hand and centralization and control on the other are, more than anything, forces that simultaneously affect media environment, regardless of their technological basis. The media can create new differences, differentiate between subcultures and bring forward new voices but also homogenize tastes and generate social conformity. These dynamics largely remain contested and they certainly can't be reduced to the effects of technology itself. Instead, they justify a continued concern for media pluralism, while also creating a need to re-think its meaning in contemporary media environment.

It can be argued that the paradoxes associated with media pluralism speak of growing complexity that influences both the means of communication and the normative models against which we assess them. As Manuel Castells (2007, p. 259) puts it: "a new round of power making in the communication space is taking place". Assuming that the development of media systems is subject to various political and social struggles between different interests and values, the challenge is to bring forward and clarify what these different alternative visions and analyze their consequences for the communication of citizens and societies. There is no denying that some of the democratizing and diversifying effects of new media

technologies are real, but so are many of their problems and biases. Thus, we need a conception of media pluralism that allows for perceiving and evaluating different developments within different media systems. In the contemporary media environment, questions about the distribution of communicative power can hardly be reduced to any simplistic measurements of media ownership or content diversity (see Karppinen, 2006). One thing that seems evident based on the above discussion is that instead of analyzing only what is produced or what is available, more emphasis needs to be put on user competencies, questions of media use, digital literacy, and other aspects related to exposure diversity. In this sense, Nicholas Garnham (1999) has interestingly discussed the application of Amartya Sen's capabilities approach to communication policy and argued that "we need to take into account both the range of communication option made available—and these must be real options, not mere choices between products and services with minimal real differences— and the ability of people actually to make use of those options" (Garnham 1999, p. 121). Furthermore, Garnham argues that we need to think of the media as "enablers of a range of functionings rather than as providers of a stream of content to be consumed" (*ibid.*, p. 121).

Media critics and policy analysts have long been concerned mostly with the availability of diverse content, but as Jan van Cuilenburg (1998, p. 45) claims, traditional concerns for the availability of diverse information and opinions are now turning into anachronistic concepts with no practical meaning. Similarly, it is increasingly clear that limitless number of options is not a value in itself. As the logic of exclusivity is shifting from the production to the filtering of information, it can be argued that the real issue for contemporary media policy is not lack of information but access to new and challenging content, exposure to different ideas, and particularly to new and innovative ideas and opinions of various alternative or minority groups, as opposed to satisfying pre-existing needs (van Cuilenburg, 1998; Sunstein, 2007; Webster, 2007; Hargittai, 2007; Hindman, 2008). However, despite the calls from policy scholars to pay attention to the aspect of exposure diversity (Webster, 2007; Napoli, 2007; Hindman, 2008), it has so far failed to gain much traction in actual media policy discussions.

My argument, however, is that the emphasis on users and individual competencies is not enough. If media pluralism is to serve as a critical concept it must also acknowledge broader questions about the role of media with regard to the distribution of power and influence in society. As argued above, the communicative abundance has not diminished the fact that some actors and groups have more communicative power, and thus resources to get their voices heard than others. Despite the new opportunities offered by new technologies, the public spheres everywhere will continue to be characterized above all by unequal distribution of communicative power between individuals, social groups, corporations and states.



To analyze and evaluate such structural asymmetries, there is a need for a broader conception of media pluralism that is not concerned only with consumer choice or specific issues like media ownership but more broadly with a more democratic distribution of communicative power in the public sphere. Markers of plurality in the media should thus not rest on the multiplication of genre, forms or markets but on the actual success of a media system in representing and giving voice to different members of society. Instead of seeing pluralism and diversity as something that could simply be measured through the number of organizations or channels available, this expanded notion would thus bring back the normative and political aspect to the concept of media pluralism.

This pursuit of media pluralism as a policy objective would thus be parallel to what Sophia Kaitatzi-Whitlock (2005, p. 168) has called "the equitable management of freedom of information". This highlights that the notion of media pluralism still refers above all to distributional questions: how much, what kind of freedom of information should be allowed to whom?

While the institutionalization and realization of the ideal of fair distribution of communicative power will obviously remain contested, it gives the debates on media pluralism some normative grounding which is not tied to specific media technologies. By taking the distribution of communicative power as a normative starting point, we can thus reclaim the concept of media pluralism from its technocratic and reductionist uses for the critical purpose of not only affirming consumer sovereignty but identifying and evaluating new forms of exclusion and concentration as well as new forms of self-expression, deliberation and participation that are emerging in the contemporary media environment.

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