

# TAKING 'FREEDOM OF THE PRESS' SERIOUSLY: CRITICAL MEDIA SOCIOLOGY AND THE CHALLENGE OF DEMOCRACY<sup>1</sup>

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## Media Sociology and the 'Problem' of Democracy

The free press is the omnipresent open eye of the spirit of the people, the embodied confidence of a people in itself, the articulate bond that ties the individual to the state and the world, the incorporated culture which transfigures material struggles into intellectual struggles and realizes its raw material shape. It is the ruthless confession of a people to itself, and it is well known that the power of confession is redeeming. The free press is the intellectual mirror in which a people sees itself, and self-viewing is the first condition of wisdom.

Karl Marx<sup>2</sup>

Freedom of the press is a sham as long as the best printing plants and huge stocks of paper are in the hands of capitalists.

V.I. Lenin<sup>3</sup>

By proposing that 'freedom of the press' needs to be taken seriously, I want to suggest that many media sociologists --- and particularly those working within critical and Marxist traditions --- can be charged with failing to think through, in any sustained manner, the democratic claims of liberal media theory. As Lenin's polemical comments reveal, there has been an all too common tendency to sweep aside liberal theories of 'freedom of the press' without adequately addressing the substance of such claims. Consequently, critical media sociology has been crippled by its inability to elaborate a strategy for the development of a socialist and democratic press. Failing to take freedom of the press seriously raises a fundamental question: is the current theoretical framework of media studies capable of confronting the problem of how to construct a democratic press?

Such a question has been made all the more pertinent given the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. The failure of 'actually existing' socialism and the virtual overnight monopolization of press markets in those nations has lent added force to voices in the West advocating neo-liberal reforms of the public media. Centuries old arguments defining 'freedom of the press' solely in terms of private

competition have made a successful return. Neo-liberals have launched a series of attacks against state regulation and public broadcasting by arguing that unfettered market competition is the *key* condition of media freedom: it keeps prices low, it forces suppliers to take risks, it guarantees access to the marketplace of ideas, and it allows consumers to decide for themselves what products will be produced (see Owen 1975:26-27).

Given the recent erosion of many public channels of communication and their subsequent domination by market forces, there is a pressing need to re-examine debates surrounding 'freedom of the press'. In this paper, I will argue that while critical studies of news production --- radical elite theory, organizational studies, and the Marxist political economy tradition --- can provide one with the conceptual tools required to successfully *deconstruct* neo-liberal claims, they fail to arm one with the necessary instruments to *reconstruct* a practical alternative to existing patterns of news production. Given the failure and abuses of state-administered socialism, socialists need to take 'freedom of the press' seriously, to radically reconsider what Marx recognized as the positive claims of liberal free press theory. To this end, I propose to advance the research project begun by Marxist critiques of news production by wedding them to a tradition of democratic thought in order to produce a third position --- a radical democratic theory. A radical democratic theory of news production will emphasize that the unfettered competition of media producers ultimately restricts freedom by generating barriers to entry, restricting diversity, and converting *public* information into *private* commodities. However, it will depart from the critical paradigm of media studies by questioning its monolithic portrait of the media and by challenging its traditional reliance upon state-centred reform. Drawing principally upon the democratic theory of Habermas, I will argue that the news media need to be reconstructed as a participatory and decentralized public sphere in which private citizens can gather to debate issues of public concern, monitor state authority, and expose private power (Habermas, 1979:198).

### **The Claims of Liberal Media Theory**

Historically, the origins of liberal media theory in the West can be traced to the early struggles waged by the ascending bourgeoisie against the censoring authority of absolutist states. The 18th Century formation of

a press critical of government and the ruling aristocracy already contained the seeds of what has come to be its widely accepted role in democratic society --- as a watchdog on the affairs of government and as an independent organ of public debate (Mill, 1972:78-79).

It was argued by many early reformers that both the independence of the press from the state and its role as a facilitator of public discussion could best be achieved by subjecting it to the impersonal and self-regulating forces of market competition. Indeed, the absence of any extra-economic agency in the transactions that took place in the 'marketplace of ideas' guaranteed that the press would be free from any kind of state coercion. Further, the economic power of each individual consumer and producer, it was alleged, was subordinate to anonymous laws of exchange; this would preclude one individual from unduly influencing the market and restricting the free and open flow of public communications (Habermas, 1989:79; Wuliger, 1991:153). Market competition would guarantee that decentralized individual decision-making involving only the calculus of personal gain would decide what messages would be produced and what messages would survive in the open market (Owen, 1975:26-27).

In rallying against the very real abuses of state censorship, however, market liberals were subsequently blinded to the possibility that non-state power structures could intervene in the process of public debate, thus limiting access to the market (Curran, 1991:29, Garnham, 1990:17-18). The possibility of the *self-censorship* of media producers, for example, was occluded.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, while it is assumed that democratic access is unproblematic under competitive conditions, history has revealed that unfettered market competition tends to raise production costs, constructing a formidable barrier to potential producers (Keane, 1989:39). As for the cost of entry as a consumer, and the discrimination against those with low incomes, market liberals are silent.

While more recently developed neo-liberal media theories put a contemporary inflection on the issue of freedom of the press by attacking modern public service broadcasting and state regulation, they nevertheless share the limitations of their predecessors. If the issue is whether or not the laws of the market can ensure democratic access to the channels of public communication, then both the liberal and neo-liberal defense of unfettered competition remain unconvincing. While neo-liberals argue that the market is efficient and promotes diversity, free competition has only eroded competition, discouraging potential producers, and

encouraging mergers and takeovers that have culminated in the rise of multinational media conglomerates (Bagdikian, 1985, 1990; Curran, 1977; Keane, 1990; Murdock, 1982, 1990; Schiller, 1989). As further evidence that the market fails to encourage competition, one need only examine the old Soviet bloc states in which state monopolies have been quickly replaced by private monopolies (Sparks, 1992).

The general weakness of market liberal approaches, therefore, has been their failure to conceptualize how market pressures restrict access to the media and undermine the spirit of universality implicit within the claims of 'freedom of the press'. In reacting so strongly against the threat of state power, liberal media theories tend to mask over those non-state power structures (e.g. capitalism, patriarchy) that can just as easily censor public expression. Consequently, this lacunae represents the point of entry for critical studies of news production.

### **Radical Elite Theory: Economic Power and the Management of News**

For radical elite theorists, democratic access to the media is undermined by the unequal power relations that permeate a class-divided society. The control and ownership of the media by wealthy owners from the privileged class means that editorial policy will be dictated by individuals "whose ideological dispositions run from soundly conservative to utterly reactionary," (Miliband, 1973:204). Ownership grants media elites the power to manufacture and disseminate class propaganda; they can function as "mind managers" (Schiller, 1973) and generate ideologies themselves, or they can act as "gatekeepers", selecting and screening ideas and opinions (Clement, 1975:282). Through the appointment of personnel, and the establishment of specific editorial policies, the media elite manage the production of news in ways that favour dominant class interests (Bagdikian, 1985:104-106).

This understanding of the 'gatekeeper' significantly alters and radicalizes earlier definitions of the term. Whereas White's (1950:386) classic study concluded that what was accepted or rejected by one news gatekeeper (a wire editor) was highly *subjective*, radical elite theories propose that the process of news selection and rejection is more a function of the gatekeeper's position within the *objective* conditions of a class structured society.

For example, Clement's detailed survey of the bibliographic data of the executives and directors of Canada's largest media conglomerates

reveals that members of this group overwhelmingly come from privileged backgrounds and have close links with other economic elites. Because media elites are inextricably tied into such power relations, Clement concludes that they are favourable to capitalist ideology and manage the flow of news by filtering out alternative views and opinions: "The mass media in Canada are class institutions run by, for and in the interest of the upper class" (1975:341). Against the backcloth of economic power, "the free expression of ideas and opinions *mainly* means the free expression of ideas and opinions which are helpful to the prevailing system of power and privilege" (Miliband, 1973: 197).

The suggestion that owners directly influence the editorial content of the news media has been widely debated and criticized. In his work, Black (1982:114) argues that direct editorial intervention is rare. Indeed, the ideas and opinions of owners often take a back seat to the financial imperatives of economic survival (Hartley, 1982:48). Hackett (1986:144), Schudson (1989), and Schlesinger et. al. (1983:163) point out that there is a relative diversity of opinion within the media and messages that are seemingly in contrast to dominant ideological positions do appear. While radical elite theorists may not deny this, they nevertheless run the risk of overstating the homogeneity of dominant interests and the internal consistency of dominant discourses (Curran, 1991:36).

Further, there is a tendency to overplay the extent of ideological domination of subordinate classes; in the radical elite model, the media audience is often portrayed as a passive and malleable mass open to direct ideological indoctrination. However, this tends to ignore how readers and spectators make meaning, how they 'decode' the news (Schlesinger, 1989:301; Hackett, 1986:146; Morley, 1980; Hall, 1980).

Finally, Hall et. al. (1978) suggest that, contrary to radical elite assumptions, journalists are not subjected to overt managerial control. Rather, news workers maintain a measure of 'relative autonomy', allowing them to shape a news story in ways that might not please upper management. Hence, the ideological role of the media "cannot be simply attributed...to the fact that the media are in large part capitalist-owned..., since this would be to ignore the day-to-day 'relative' autonomy of the journalist and news producers from direct economic control" (1978: 57).

Radical elite theories have thus received a number of potentially disabling blows. However, in many instances the critique of this work tends to bend the stick too far in the other direction, overplaying the 'relative autonomy' of journalists and the resistant readings of audiences.

In such cases, the crucial issue of the relationship between ownership, access, and news content is simply skirted. Yet, the rise of a new generation of interventionist owners such as Rupert Murdoch, Conrad Black, and the late Robert Maxwell, reveals that media elites can exercise some degree of authority over their respective organizations. When Murdoch purchased the *Sunday Times* in 1981, for example, he placed pressure on senior editors to move the politics of the paper to the right. Faced with such intrusive management, more than one hundred 'relatively autonomous' journalists either left the newspaper in protest or were fired (Curran, 1990:132). While the *Sunday Times* example may be an extreme case, it does point to the fact that media elites can and in some cases do exert powerful pressures on the news production process. Radical elite theorists, therefore, do not necessarily deny that journalists enjoy a degree of professional autonomy, but they argue that *on balance* the ideological interests of those who own and manage the media are served. Even if radical elite theorists tend to overstate the magnitude and frequency of managerial intervention and ideological control, they are nevertheless correct to emphasize that the right of ownership carries with it a significant degree of power to shape the nature of public discourse.

### **The Study of News Organizations: The Social Construction of Reality**

Radical elite theories attempt to discount the liberal claim that market competition guarantees a diverse and democratic flow of news and information by pointing to the unequal distribution of power within a class-based society. Organizational studies of the news media, on the other hand, challenge liberal media theory by shifting the focus of analysis away from elite manipulation of the news and toward the institutional settings and work practices of the journalists who selectively define, determine, and shape the world's events (Molotch and Lester, 1974; Tuchman, 1978: 179). Questions of access to the media and of the relationship between media production and ideological reproduction are reconceptualized, not as a process of direct intervention, but as a consequence of the routine tasks of news production itself (Chibnall, 1977; Clarke, 1987; Ericson et. al., 1987; Schlesinger, 1977). However, this theoretical advance is accomplished with an added risk. By focusing the analysis upon the internal workings of media institutions, there is the danger of underplaying the broader social-economic context within which news practices are undertaken (Bruck, 1981:13).

Organizational studies, on the whole, conclude that the primary factor affecting who and what will be given access to the media stems from the institutional needs of the media industry. For example, Tuchman's (1978: 21) study of the seemingly chaotic newsroom environment concludes that time and budgetary constraints force journalists to cast a 'news net' over the social world. How far the net is flung, when it is flung, and how tight the mesh is woven will determine which events and issues will be covered. Because of the constant pressure of meeting deadlines and budgets, journalists are encouraged to cast their net in the direction of 'legitimate' institutions and official sources who conduct 'routinized events' such as organized press conferences and public speeches (Tuchman, 1978:93-95; Epstein, 1973:32). Fishman (1978, 1980), Gans (1979: 284), and Molotch and Lester (1974:107) conclude that this dependency upon institutional sources leads journalists to view the world as bureaucratically structured, a process reflected in the division of labour into institutional 'news beats' (e.g. city hall, police, courts). Such a dependency grants privileged access to social elites and means that anything that is outside or in violation of bureaucratic procedures is a 'non-event' (Fishman, 1980:84). Consequently, there is the danger that bureaucratic elites can manage the media for their own institutional needs (Ericson et. al., 1989; Schlesinger, 1990).

Hence, the implication of this research is that groups and social movements that espouse oppositional politics are forced to compete for media attention with well established and well financed bureaucracies. In order to enter the public sphere, therefore, counter-hegemonic groups are tacitly encouraged to alter their organizational structure to conform to the bureaucratic standards demanded by news gatherers (Gitlin, 1980:242-244). As a result, social movements are in danger of being absorbed by or, alternatively, expelled from the dominant knowledge structure of society.

Furthermore, such constraints as time, technology, and money help determine not just what gets reported, but also how it is reported and framed. As Tuchman (1972:662) argues, the very nature of 'objective' and 'balanced' reporting results from journalists' attempts to minimize risks imposed by deadlines, libel suits, and supervisors' reprimands. The professional code of objectivity, in turn, limits access to the media in two ways. First, 'impartial' and 'balanced' reporting requires journalists to juxtapose contrasting views and conclude that the truth lies somewhere

in the middle (Epstein, 1973:67, 168-169). However, this discourse of *consensus* tends to mask over the fundamental *divisions* within the social world (Clarke, 1987:628). Hence, counter-hegemonic social actors who want to publicly question the nature of this consensus may find their arguments muted by the professional mandate to present the news in a balanced and consensual form. Second, 'objectivity' restricts access by allowing media organizations to secure and maintain their monopoly positions (Soloski, 1989:214). If the news were presented in an overtly political manner, then the market would be ripe for competition. By reporting the news objectively, however, reader loyalty is not made a function of the ideological stance of the newspaper.

Despite their general strengths in detailing the institutional and professional practices that limit democratic access to the news media, one problem nevertheless plagues many of these studies, namely a kind of 'organizational determinism'. For example, while Epstein (1973) and Tuchman (1972, 1978) provide a detailed and convincing list of the economic and political constraints that affect the production of news, there is little attempt to trace these factors to their origins. The strongest studies in this tradition are those that stress that the organizational needs of media industries do not spring up spontaneously and independently, but are themselves determined and conditioned by a larger frame of analysis --- the sets of social relations that figure in capitalist society and that extend through and shape the media organization in the first instance (Clarke, 1987:39-40; Schlesinger, 1977). While time, technology, money, and professional codes of journalism undoubtedly exert a considerable influence upon the production of news, it is important to recognize another level of pressures and limits, those derived from market relations.

### **The Marxist Political Economy Tradition: The Market as Censor**

Radical political economists, by focusing upon the structural logic of capitalist production, have raised three interrelated objections to the universalist claims of liberal media theory: 1) the logic of competition fosters the growth of monopolies, raising costs and discouraging potential producers; 2) as an advertising driven industry, only those media that can deliver attractive audiences to advertisers will survive and, thus, not all citizens will be served by the media; and 3) advertising-financing encourages a separation between information-rich and information-poor media products that exacerbates class differences. Hence, unlike radical

elite theories which tend to focus their analysis on *who* controls the media, the neo-Marxist political economic tradition concentrates more on *how* the underlying forces of a capitalist economic system structure both the operations and outputs of media organizations (Murdock, 1980:38; Murdock, 1982:124; Garnham, 1986b).<sup>5</sup>

Historically, the promise of universal access to the marketplace of ideas has been circumvented by the ever increasing concentration of media ownership which has drastically reduced the number of outlets necessary for the dissemination of a diverse set of views and opinions (Royal Commission on Newspapers, 1981:119-121). More recently, the success of neo-liberal initiatives in persuading governments to privatize public communication networks and to deregulate other parts of the industry have only exacerbated the trend toward greater monopolization and conglomeration. During the late 1980s, for example, a wave of corporate deals culminated in GE's acquisition of NBC, Sony's takeover of CBS, and the merger of Time Inc. and Warner Brothers (Murdock, 1990:1; Kellner, 1990:66).

This feature of the communications industries, according to neo-Marxist political economists, is not simply indicative of a 'failure' in the market, as liberals would have it (see Owen, 1975:27). Rather, it is endemic to the competitive market system itself. There is a structural tendency embedded within marketplace competition that drives producers to lower their operating costs. One of the principle ways in which this is accomplished is through a shift to greater economies of scale in production. However, this strategy raises the cost of entry to the market and discourages potential producers (Keane, 1991:80; Curran 1977, 1978; Schiller, 1989:36).<sup>6</sup> In short, there appears to be a structural contradiction between freedom of expression and unlimited freedom of the market. It is thus doubtful that a communications system dominated by private ownership and market competition can secure the diversity of news and debate required for the development of an informed citizenry and an effective democratic process (Murdock, 1990:4; Picard, 1985:132-133).

Beyond the issues of media concentration and corporate power, political economists stress that an analysis of the specific nature of commodity production within the media industry reveals that dependency upon advertising revenue factors in a whole complex set of pressures which shape the production of news. Smythe's work suggests that the real commodity produced by the news media is not a television program

or a newspaper item, but an audience that is sold to advertisers (1977, 1981:16, 23-39). The non-advertising content of the media is a 'free lunch' designed to attract specific audiences so that advertisers may be able to reach them with their messages. The 'free lunch' precludes the existence of oppositional voices in the media since advertisers demand content that will "cultivate a mood conducive to favorable reaction to the advertisers' explicit and implicit messages," (1981:38). The media act as a 'hegemonic filter', screening in the values of the capitalist system and screening out unwanted ideas, not by way of an elite gatekeeper, but as a function of the imperatives of commodity production --- the need to produce audiences to sell to advertisers.

While Smythe's argument has sparked a great deal of controversy,<sup>7</sup> it nevertheless raises a number of key questions about how the economic logic of news production undermines the principle of democratic access. That is, one of the consequences of the media's dependency upon advertising revenue is that those products that cannot gather audiences that advertisers find attractive will simply not survive. The demise of the radical working class press in Britain, for example, has been directly attributed to the inability of such newspapers to lower cover prices by increasing advertising space (Curran, 1977, 1979, 1980). Advertisers, in their quest to reach 'up-market' audiences, have historically exerted a powerful pressure on the radical press to redefine its target audience and moderate its editorial stance (Curran, 1977:219; Schudson, 1978:25). Even today, wary of losing audiences and advertising revenue, the news media come to occupy a kind of ideological 'middle-ground' and package their 'free lunch' accordingly (Gruneau and Hackett, 1990:291). In the process, significant social interests are simply not represented.

Advertising pressure is also exacerbating recent trends toward market segmentation that are generating a 'two-tiered' press system. In many Western nations, markets are sharply divided between a popular tabloid press that is comprised primarily of 'light' entertainment stories, and an elite quality press that features 'serious' matters of finance and politics (Curran et. al., 1980; Ericson et. al., 1991:42; Sparks, 1988, 1991, 1992). In order to understand this phenomenon, one must keep in mind that an advertising-financed press system channels marketing strategies in two possible directions, toward capturing a large and heterogeneous audience, or a small but wealthy audience that advertisers find highly attractive. For example, the British tabloid *The Sun* charges advertisers

\$US 52,000 to reach an audience of 10,220,000. In order to reach the 694,000 readers of *The Financial Times*, however, advertisers are willing to pay \$US 45,600 (Sparks, 1992: 39). Proportionally, advertisers are prepared to invest far more to reach the educated and wealthy readers of *The Financial Times*; this suggests that elite social groups are 'over-represented' in the media market. Therefore, given that papers with smaller circulations and elite readers can earn advertising revenue very close to those with large mass audiences, no real incentives exist for the quality press to extend its readership beyond its small market.

The market for news and information, as driven by the demands of advertisers, is thus becoming highly fragmented and is further widening the gap between those who are 'information-rich' and those who are 'information-poor'. The new 'quality' press, with the majority of its space devoted to public policy issues, is highly inaccessible. Its textual density and significantly higher cover price effectively exclude those consumers who lack the educational, cultural, and financial capital necessary to digest the material.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to liberal press theory, marketplace competition cannot live up to its claims of universal access. Structural imperatives of private competition and advertiser-financing necessarily create a situation in which access for both producers and consumers of information is restricted.

### A 'Post-Bourgeois' Public Sphere: A Radical Democratic Response

The lamentable but inevitable conclusion that must be drawn from research over the past couple of decades is that the communications media have failed democracy.  
Peter Golding (1990:100)

From the review of the literature, it is clear that a number of institutional factors continue to militate against the full realization of 'freedom of the press'. The private ownership and growing concentration of the media industries are granting more power to corporations and elites while public channels of communication are steadily weakened (Melody, 1990; Schiller, 1989). Market imperatives that have conditioned particular organizational practices have led journalists to adopt news gathering routines and professional ideologies that work against the dissemination of oppositional ideas and opinions. Further, the structural logic of a competitive market system leads to increased costs of entry and monopolization, thus reducing diversity. As the news media have come

to rely more and more upon advertising, popular radical views have been forced out of the market. Finally, advertising imperatives have led to a class-based segmentation of the press which is further accelerating the gap between the information-rich and the information-poor, a phenomenon that is occurring throughout the communications industry (Murdock and Golding, 1989). Taken together, these arguments suggest that there is good reason to be concerned about 'freedom of the press' today.

However, the great limitation of the critical work surveyed above is the inability to investigate the relationship between the media and democracy beyond the critique of existing models of private ownership. In many cases, the media is constructed as a giant monolith of the ruling class or as a rigid ideological state apparatus impervious to reform of any kind short of a revolutionary transformation of society. In other work, a faith in state-administered remedies fails to move the analysis beyond the state/market dichotomy initiated by liberal media theory (Garnham, 1986a:39-41). However, state collectivist solutions have often in practice led to direct control of the media (as in the former USSR), or to the indirect state pressures exercised in liberal democracies. In the latter instance, governments can exert a powerful influence over the media through appointments, funding, the granting of state advertising contracts, 'information control', and the establishment of policy guidelines (Curran, 1991:47; Keane, 1991:103; Murdock and Golding, 1989:189; Herman and Chomsky, 1988:24). The real challenge facing media sociology, therefore, is one of reforming the manner in which news and information is produced so as to avoid the dangers of both state and non-state censorship.

To this end, Habermas' research into the nature of the public sphere --- the realm in which citizens can develop and express their political will --- has provoked a great deal of recent interest within media studies. According to Habermas (1979, 1989), a 'bourgeois public sphere' emerged in Western Europe in the late Eighteenth Century as the ascending middle classes struggled against the powers of the absolutist state. In the process, a new social space developed between the state and civil society. Unlike the 'representative public sphere' of the feudal period within which rulers merely displayed their power before the people, the bourgeois public sphere was one within which private citizens could gather to debate and discuss issues about the exercise of power. In coffee houses, salons, reading clubs, and most notably in the press,

individuals could become informed and express opinions about the activities of government. While Habermas stresses the positive qualities of the early public sphere --- its claims of equality, universalism, and rationalism --- he also admits that such claims were hollow, for only the educated male property-owners of the day were ever granted access (Habermas, 1989:109-110).

Nevertheless, Habermas emphasizes that the *ideal* of the bourgeois public sphere is important to retain, especially in contemporary societies in which there has been a dramatic 'refeudalization' of the public sphere. Echoing earlier critiques of the 'culture industry' (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972), Habermas argues that the emergence of the mass media and the public relations industry has transformed a culture-debating public into a culture-consuming public (Habermas, 1989:160-161). Public policy decisions are now made in secret between the state and large bureaucratic interest groups (political parties, lobby groups, 'think-tanks') and then 'sold' to citizens by way of the mass media and the persuasive techniques of advertising. The public's role in debating the allocation of resources and the regulation of social relations has been superseded by profoundly anti-democratic institutions.

In this regard, Habermas' work bears a close resemblance to the democratic themes first expressed by Tonnies (1955:255-256) and Dewey (1946/1927:117-121). All three authors point to the eclipse of active public participation in a bureaucratically administered society. Witnessing the rise in prominence of 'public opinion', for example, Tonnies feared that both the state and powerful private interest groups would try, by nefarious means, to shape the public will for their own gain (1955:256). Recognizing the same tendency in American society, Dewey argued that only the public education of all citizens and the free flow of communication could lead to the recovery of public life (1927: 166).

In advancing the work of these authors, I do not mean to suggest that it is unproblematic. Habermas has been criticized --- rightly, in my view --- for his pessimistic portrayal of 'mass' society, his romantic conception of the bourgeois public sphere, the complete omission of alternative 'plebian' public spheres, and his unqualified acceptance of rational speech over and above all other forms of communication (Keane, 1984:90-93, 179; Curran, 1991:42; Scannell, 1989). Likewise, Dewey's assertion that the free flow of communication alone is enough to guarantee the formation of a democratic public tends to gloss over the existence of a whole series of inegalitarian social relations (patriarchy,

wage-labour) that require democratic reform as well. Nevertheless, I think that the democratic thought of these writers, with its participatory and communicative emphasis, provides some of the groundwork necessary for constructing a 'post-bourgeois' public sphere when it is wedded to elements of the Marxist critique of the production of news.

In order to extend media access to citizens who have been excluded, there is a need to reconceptualize communication systems, and the news media in particular, in ways that continue to challenge liberal media theory and yet recognize the limitations of the Marxist and neo-Marxist critique. A radical democratic theory, therefore, should not view the media solely as the independent watchdog of the state nor as the rigid ideological apparatus of late capitalism. Rather, the media need to be conceptualized as the potential public space in which freely communicating citizens discuss, protest, and debate issues relating to the allocation of economic, political, and cultural resources. Consequently, a truly democratic media system must seek to represent all significant interests in society. This can be accomplished through the recognition and progressive reformation of those institutional configurations that inhibit full public participation: ownership and media concentration; organizational constraints and journalistic practices; the structural imperatives of advertising-financed media production; and the class segmentation of audiences.

*Ownership and Concentration:* The right of private ownership carries with it a considerable degree of power over the channels of public communication and the machinery of social representation. Likewise, the ever increasing concentration of news media outlets raises real fears that a large number of public interests are not being served. Because there are many different and conflicting ways in which meaning about the world can be constructed, who gets represented, what gets left out, and how people, things and events are signified are profoundly important. However, the current structure of media ownership prevents different kinds of social groupings and representations from entering into the production of news.

Proponents of market-led approaches have, of course, not been silent on this issue. There is a wide-spread recognition that the news media have or may become, unwittingly or otherwise, tools of powerful political and corporate interests. Such fears of press 'accountability' have sparked a series of public commissions and inquiries into the structure of

media ownership and control. In Canada, for example, the Kent Commission was established in 1980 in the wake of the simultaneous closing of the *Ottawa Journal* and the *Winnipeg Tribune*, a move many saw as evidence that 'freedom of the press' was being undermined by market forces. However, no doubt because of the deeply embedded liberal belief in a press 'free' from government regulation, the Kent Commission's recommendation that a formal regulatory agency, the Press Rights Panel, be established was rejected in the face of protests from the media (Dornan, 1991:174-75). Instead, news organizations which had not already done so, agreed to regulate themselves by setting up 'independent' press councils and including regular columns in their publications in which readers' representatives could address complaints and monitor reportage. More recently, news media organizations have offered readers and spectators editorial 'talk-back' telephone lines, allowing audiences to register their views or complaints.

While press councils, readers' representatives, and talk-back lines are vitally important avenues whereby citizens may have their complaints and views heard and followed through, alone they do not sufficiently address the underlying issue of the hierarchy of power reproduced in the media. As Dornan (1991:179) notes, for example, a press council adjudicates only on whether the news media has 'played by the rules' and is therefore not in a position to question whether the rules themselves are suspect. As such, 'marginal' or 'fringe' groups who say they are systematically excluded from the media will find their complaints falling on deaf ears so long as their exclusion is based upon the accepted structure of media ownership and the routine practices of journalism.

Before advocating state regulation, however, media researchers must also be aware of the limitations of traditional state-collectivist approaches to the problems posed by private ownership and concentration. The persistent danger, even in a democratic society, is that state-funded media systems could become too vulnerable to state interference (as was the case with the Thatcher government's relationship with the BBC), or too paternalistic and rigid, impenetrable to the needs and demands of the people.

A radical democratic theory should begin to think seriously about alternative and innovative arrangements of ownership. This could be accomplished by studying the possibility and feasibility of worker-controlled news collectives and community run news services. Similarly, research could draw upon the Swedish case, for instance, in which

independent and representative press councils mete out start-up funds and subsidies to support a wide range of newspapers (Gustafsson, 1980).

In the large electronic and print news media, co-operative ownership arrangements are less likely. However, media researchers need to more fully explore the possibility that independence from market censorship could be achieved through innovative forms of public ownership. Raymond Williams (1961:344-345) has suggested, for example, that state ownership be counter-balanced by placing production decisions firmly in the hands of media workers themselves, free from the dictates of upper management and government appointees.

At the very least, we need to think about enacting provisions to provide public broadcasting systems such as the BBC and the CBC with greater autonomy from the state. This is made all the more important given the recent criticisms levelled against public broadcasting by state representatives. For example, American Senator Robert Dole recently proposed an amendment to the public broadcasting act that, if enacted, would cut-back federal funding of the Public Broadcasting System unless PBS affiliates produced more 'balanced' programming. In Canada, the right-wing economist John Crispo was appointed to the Board of Governors of the CBC, and has used his position to criticize public broadcasting and advance his own neo-liberal views. To confront such challenges, media sociologists need to think of ways of entrenching and safeguarding the autonomy of public broadcasting systems. For example, is it feasible to have government appointments replaced by elections? Could we conceive of a specific funding arrangement that is constitutionally guaranteed so that no financial threat could be made against the public networks?

*Organizational Constraints and Journalistic Practices:* The study of news organizations details how journalists come to rely upon elite sources and bureaucratic institutions for 'factual' information. Hence, the fear is that resource-rich elite institutions could successfully initiate news 'campaigns' to win public support for their goals (Drier, 1982). An investigation into the possibility of co-operative ownership of newspapers might signal one avenue through which those opinions that have been marginalized from the mainstream media may reach a larger audience and contribute to a more diverse public debate. While new communications technologies have been used primarily for private gain, innovations in desktop publishing and satellite transmission, if made publicly accessible,

hold out the promise of lowering the cost of entry for new small-scale producers. As Enzensberger (1974) has noted, media technologies make possible the mass participation in social life, but their current application undermines this goal. Researchers, therefore, need to explore the new technologies of communication with the aim of altering their social application to serve the democratic needs and aspirations of citizens.

Coupled with these areas of investigation, researchers need to consider the possibility of developing new journalistic practices that may enrich the diversity of news and information. While it is true that journalists face overwhelming professional and legal constraints, it may nevertheless be possible that media workers themselves begin to challenge traditional patterns of news presentation. Codes of balance and objectivity, which often work against counter-hegemonic groups, may be replaced with more investigative, self-reflexive, and critical forms of journalism.

Further, media sociologists need to emphasize that institutions that have not traditionally been open to public supervision and accountability, such as certain departments of the state and almost all private businesses --- and including quite centrally the media itself --- need to be the focus of renewed public scrutiny. In terms of the media, reader's representatives and self-regulatory bodies are not enough to secure an accountable press. Media sociologists need to recognize the value of those civil society organizations that are concerned with the media's accountability, such as the feminist collective MediaWatch and the American-based Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR). Closer collaboration with these groups will enable a greater sharing of ideas and research, and alert academics to recent developments in alternative media. Researchers must also not ignore right-wing critics of the media, such as the Fraser Institute and Accuracy in Media (AIM). These groups must be engaged in public debate so that questions of the media's accountability receive a much more widespread hearing than is currently the case. In this way, 'publicity' can be re-invested with its original critical intention --- the exposure of power and domination before the public (Habermas, 1989:195).

*Advertising-Financing:* While market liberals claim that unfettered media competition renders the consumer sovereign, the advertising-driven structure of the industry simply does not bear this argument out. The readers and viewers of the news do not decide what

ideas and opinions will survive in the market, because they are not the consumers. Rather, it is the advertisers whose demands are sovereign because they purchase the audience-commodity produced by the media (Picard, 1985:135).

Advertising needs, therefore, can work to exclude a wide range of views and opinions from the media. However, the elimination of advertising as demanded by some media critics is simply not a practical or even a desirable alternative. Instead of promoting advertising bans, radical democratic research needs to think about the possibility and practicality of press subsidies to offset the lack of advertising revenue.

*Class Segmentation:* While Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere was eclipsed by the development of mass politics and public administration, the rise of a 'serious' international press and the expansion of high-cost specialized information services lends credence to the argument that a supranational *private* sphere is taking shape (Sparks, 1991:69; Garnham, 1990:104-105). This process mirrors the contemporary globalization of world financial markets. Readers in New York, Tokyo, London, and Toronto have access to *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Financial Times*, newspapers that engage in the kind of rational and critical debate privileged by Habermas. But like the early bourgeois 'public' sphere, access is limited. Only educated and wealthy English-speaking people can participate. If equal access to the sources of public information, as well as equal opportunity to participate in public debates, lies at the heart of the democratic process, then this new transnational *private* sphere represents a growing threat to the abilities of citizens to participate in a democratic polity.

To offset this tendency, researchers need to think about the development of a 'quality' or 'serious' press accessible to a much broader segment of the population, a radical press that critically addresses issues of public concern. To counter arguments that there is simply no market for such a newspaper, it should be recalled that the death of the early radical press and the subsequent decline in public debate in popular newspapers was not a function of consumer taste, but of advertising demands. There is good reason to believe that a mass quality newspaper modelled after the Nineteenth Century British radical press (Curran, 1977), publicly subsidized and maintained, would find a significant audience. Such an audience, moreover, would represent the first semblance of a post-bourgeois *public* sphere in which both the power of

the state and the power of private capital could be held up to public scrutiny.

A democratic media system, therefore, must do more than simply represent the current 'balance' of forces in society. It must actively compensate those subordinate social groups who lack the necessary financial, technical, and cultural resources to engage in public debate. Access can be better guaranteed, however, only if *imbalances* in social, economic, and political power can be corrected. I have made a number of tentative proposals for future research aimed at developing and expanding a decentralized, participatory, and accountable public news media. Such a project, I strongly believe, is made ever more urgent given the rapid erosion of a public sector of communications, the growing power of transnational capital, and the increasingly secretive operations of 'democratic' governments. Media sociologists need to take 'freedom of the press' seriously, but not in its liberal guise. Instead, there is a need to propose alternative formations that will better reflect the rights and needs of citizens to be heard, to be informed, and to engage in a "democratic culture of critical discourse" (Elliott, 1982:243).

## Notes

1. For helpful commentaries on an earlier version of this paper, I wish to thank Wallace Clement, Chris Dornan, and John Harp. However, the usual disclaimers apply.
2. Cited in Owen (1975:33).
3. Cited in Picard (1985:131).
4. John Stuart Mill (1972:78-113) did of course worry about the possibility of non-state censorship, but not that of media producers or market imperatives. On the contrary, he feared the tyranny of public opinion, the possibility that the 'passionate' and 'irrational' views of the masses could silence the voices of the minority, understood principally as the privileged classes. Faced with the dilemma that in the competitive marketplace of ideas it is not necessarily truth that survives in the court of public opinion, Mill supported the formation of a kind of *pouvoirs intermediaires*, representative officials who could purify and rationally sift

through the passions of the people as expressed in public opinion. Educated and powerful citizens would form an elite public whose rational and critical debate would guide public discussion. This level of debate, according to Mill, would best be directed by a free and open exchange of communication in a competitive marketplace of ideas. Hence, Mill never doubted the market's role in securing democratic freedoms such as liberty of the press, and as such he failed to see the contradiction between capitalist relations of production and the democratic ideal of equal access to the marketplace of ideas in which individual self-development could be achieved (Habermas, 1989:136-137; Macpherson, 1977:61-62; Schwarzlose, 1989:8-9).

5. Many studies, of course, draw upon insights offered by both radical elite and political economic (e.g. Bagdikian, 1985; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). My point is not that these two traditions are incompatible, but rather that they represent two *tendencies* within media studies. Radical elite theory is more concerned with questions of 'agency' (how do owners exert control), while political economic studies focus more on 'structural' concerns (see Murdock, 1982).

6. In 1855, for example, it required a capital investment of 4,000 British pounds to launch the *Daily Telegraph*. In 1870 the *Daily Chronicle* was re-established at a cost of 150,000 pounds. To found the *Tribune* in 1906-8, 300,000 pounds had to be invested and by the 1920's Lord Beaverbrook needed 2 million pounds to purchase the *Sunday Express* (Curran, 1977:214).

7. See, for example, the so-called 'blindspot debate' in Murdock (1978), Livant (1979), and Garnham (1986).

8. In terms of cost alone, the 'quality' press quite clearly discriminates against low income consumers. In Ottawa, one copy of *The Financial Times of Canada* sells for \$1.00. An issue of the popular tabloid, *Ottawa Sun*, sells for only \$0.35. Assuming that one purchased these papers over the course of a year, the difference in price would be quite substantial.

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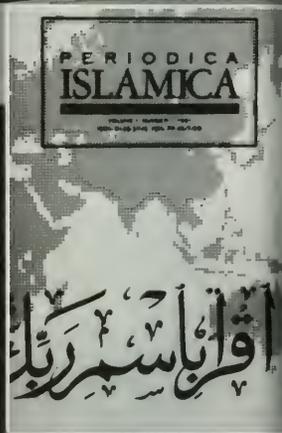
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