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## **Dissemination and dialogue in the public sphere: a case for public service media online**

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Dominant democratic theories prescribe two ideal functions for the media: shielded from state oppression and commercial coercion they should, first, make important information available for all and, second, enable citizens to communicate with each other about relevant issues. The media should both disseminate information and facilitate dialogue. As a key policy tool in Western European nation states, public service broadcasting has arguably contributed to the former task but it has persistently been criticized for not providing space for participation, neglecting the role related to dialogue.

Online communication, optimists claim, may fix the problem: publicly available services from chat rooms and discussion forums, text-based news and informational sites, and databases of audio-visual content have a democratic potential because they are so easily accessible. They also render new forms of interactivity possible. While radio and television disseminate, the internet, the reasoning goes, is about dialogue. It can turn more listeners and readers into speakers and writers. Online communication, then, might boost participation, and potentially make it fairer, bringing us closer to the ideal prescribed for the media (Coleman and Gøtze, 2001: 5; Froomkin, 2004; Kellner, 2004: 51; Woo-Young, 2005; see also Ytreberg, 2006: 133).

Where does this leave public service broadcasting? Some label it a relic of paternalist, modernist ideas. Others strive to rethink it on new media platforms. These arguments tend to be contextually specific for the expansion of an existing institution's fields of activity, or build on an unwarranted optimism regarding the democratic potential of the internet. What is missing is a more fundamental discussion of a possible legitimization of public service media online, and – on that basis – a fleshing out of what it could look like. This article sets out to contribute to this discussion.

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In his book *Speaking into the Air*, John Durham Peters stages ‘a debate between the greatest proponent of dialogue, Socrates, and the most enduring voice for dissemination, Jesus’ (1999: 35). Observing that dialogue has ‘attained something of a holy status’, he seeks to rehabilitate dissemination (1999: 33). I employ the two concepts as descriptions corresponding to the ideal communicative forms – the spreading of information and the discussions – needed in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup>

My thesis is, first, that aspects of dissemination are crucial for any understanding of public online communication and, second, that dissemination has a normative potential in the public sphere which should be included in a legitimate concept of public service media online. Such a concept needs to acknowledge how the internet stands out with its potential for facilitating dialogue and supporting new relations between citizens. Equally important, however, is recognizing similarities to broadcasting: by extending the ideas behind public service broadcasting, the internet can be utilized to contribute also to the other task ascribed to the media – the dissemination of information. In substantiating the thesis, I test the continued relevance of normative public sphere theory for this field of media studies. This should offer discussions on the current evolution of public service broadcasting a much-needed grounding in political philosophy (see Born, 2005: 111).

The article first examines recent proposals for transferring public service broadcasting remits to the internet. Second, employing the concepts of public sphere theory, I critically scrutinize these proposals’ premises: a contrast to broadcasting as dissemination, and an optimistic view of the internet’s contribution to the public sphere as dialogue. I next argue for untying the communicative forms of dissemination and dialogue from broadcast media and online communication, respectively. This yields an understanding of the legitimacy of, and a potential scheme for, public service media online.

### **Notions of public service media online**

Public service media already exist online. We find them for instance where institutions like libraries and museums expand onto the internet, offering at best innovative and highly valuable services. Another relevant place to look would be in the regulation of existing Western European public service broadcasters.

From the late 1990s, such broadcasters extended their activities beyond traditional television and radio, also outside the audio-visual, to include text-based electronic media services. Their regulatory frameworks struggled to fully cope with the challenges that followed. Even in 2008, the ad hoc regulation of European publicly funded broadcasters’ online services is evident in an ongoing struggle involving the European Union (EU), national governments, commercial actors and public service broadcasting institutions. Online services are not acknowledged as an autonomous part of the public service

broadcasting remit (Moe, forthcoming). Several scholars have argued for different plans that seek to correct just that.

Graham Murdock (2005) proposes one of the more ambitious models. Writing about public service broadcasting institutions – but remaining in a British context – he resituates 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’ (2005: 227). Encompassing the public sphere, this space is imagined as potentially global in scope, with public service broadcasting making up ‘the central node’ in the network (2005: 227). Importantly, Murdock (2005: 228) presupposes use of the television set as the terminal for the digital commons.

Murdock identifies different sets of rights deemed crucial for the idea of citizenship, tied to information, knowledge, deliberation, representation and participation. He then shows how public service broadcasting historically has contributed to the realization of these rights. And, he argues, the BBC has already utilized the internet to extend all these rights further (Murdock, 2005: 226). Its central position in a digital commons, then, rests on a claim that it can counter looming developments of marketization, fragmentation and exclusion. Murdock’s contribution is a striking call for rethinking the functions of public service broadcasting institutions, with online services as merely one part.

The proposal provides a point of departure for exploring a more basic argument for transferring the ideas to the internet.<sup>2</sup> As opposed to Murdock, such an exploration does not start from existing institutions. I treat public service broadcasting as a media policy tool, employed to allocate resources and manage media sectors, and am therefore not primarily preoccupied with the future of today’s broadcasters. Further, my scheme will not be restricted by the television set as terminal, but will seek to embrace the potential of other appliances. On the other hand, I do not set out to formulate a complete remit. Instead, I limit my argument to discussing the rationale for public service media online.

Another relevant proposal, then, concentrates exclusively on the internet. Pointing to ‘the tribal disintegration of the public’ and establishing that ‘few would now disagree that we are facing a veritable crisis of public participation’, Stephen Coleman (2004a: 88, 90) proposes a fresh context for public communication. He finds this context online and believes that the internet could be a medium ‘for new relations between citizens’ (2004a: 91). Coleman sets out to create new arenas for public debate. The main part of the solution is found in a ‘publicly-funded, independently-managed online civic commons’, in which he envisions a ‘key role’ for the BBC (2004a: 96, 98). The existing broadcaster should seemingly concentrate its internet activities on helping ‘the public to articulate its views’ (2004a: 98).

This plan relies on a belief that the innovative potential the internet’s contribution to the public sphere lies in the many-to-many mode of communication: it significantly lowers the threshold for an audience member to become a speaker through novel modes of address. ‘The internet brought about a new form of

publicness – mediated and dialogical at the same time’ (Splichal, 2006: 702). The space that opens up sustains ‘a new sort of “distributive” rather than unified public sphere with new forms of interaction’ (Bohman, 2004: 139). For internet optimists, these qualities yield a radical potential:

The difference between television and the internet is a consequence of their different technical structures. In broadcasting a single source sends out messages to a mass audience. The Internet enables reciprocal communication among small groups. The members of these groups both receive and emit information. There is a return here to the normal pattern of human communication in which listening and speaking roles alternate rather than being distributed exclusively to one or another participant in the communication process. (Feenberg, 2006: 3; see also Coleman, 2004b: 1; Woo-Young, 2005: 925)

On this basis, Coleman’s notion of public service media online limits itself to exploiting the internet’s potential for facilitating dialogue. It builds on two premises: a contrast to broadcasting as dissemination, and an optimistic view of online communication’s contribution to the public sphere as dialogue. These assertions – and their implications – deserve critical scrutiny.

### **Media in the public sphere: online communication as contrasted to broadcasting**

Broadcasting originally meant to sow by hand, in as wide semi-circles as possible. It is a metaphor of optimistic modernism, presupposing a centre, a periphery and a resource one wishes to disseminate (Gripsrud, 2002: 262). Peters uses Jesus’ parable of the sower to illustrate the characteristics of broadcasting. The preacher spreads the ‘word of the kingdom’ (Peters, 1999: 52). In the case of radio and television organized as broadcasting, the centre was a national hub of power, and important informational, educational and cultural content could be disseminated to all citizens in modernizing states simultaneously, thus contributing to the project of Enlightenment. This made broadcast media fit as tools to construct a national identity (e.g. van den Bulck, 2001). The idea of the nation state as an ‘imagined community’ depended on the role of the mass media (Anderson, 1983). If the press helped build such communities, radio and television intensified them through simultaneity. In addition, one can point to another function assigned to broadcast media: they made it possible for the citizens of the nation to contribute to the construction of public opinion (Gripsrud, 2002: 271).

There are several ways to criticize this stand. The reasoning most relevant for a discussion of relations between broadcasting and online communication argues that the former’s contribution to the public sphere is limited given some basic characteristics: as dissemination, broadcasting is perceived as impersonal, one-to-many and one-way (see Peters, 1999; Scannell, 2005). An

assessment against criteria of an ideal public sphere illustrates the consequential problem.

Jürgen Habermas's (1962, 1992, 1996 [1992]) evolving theory has provided a dominant conceptual grounding for research assessing the media, not least public service broadcasting, in the public sphere (see Collins, 2002: 65–78; Garnham, 1986, 1992; Scannell, 1989). Placed in a larger theory of deliberative democracy, the public sphere is now described as a multitude of overlapping and intersecting parts, 'a sounding board for problems', a 'warning system with sensors' spread throughout society (Habermas, 1996 [1992]: 359). Different media should make relevant information available and assist the institutions of civil society by transmitting concerns from the periphery of society, generating public debate and mounting pressure for the political system to respond.

This notion of the public sphere remains disputed (see Roberts and Crossley, 2004 for overview).<sup>3</sup> Some even dismiss it altogether. Notably, Chantal Mouffe's theory of agonistic democracy places questions of power at the very centre of politics – in contrast to a Habermasian concept of the public sphere where ideally, according to her, these processes are eradicated (Mouffe, 2000: 98ff). The task of democratic politics, then, is to mobilize collective passions towards democratic designs. Theorists must envisage the making of an agonistic public sphere where hegemonic political projects confront each other (Mouffe, 2005: 3). Mouffe finds this approach fundamentally incompatible with a Habermasian theory.

However, in its revised form, a deliberative democratic theory's public sphere concept has sought to incorporate such a line of criticism, especially from feminist theorists (e.g. Fraser, 1992: 128–37; Young, 1996: 128ff). The model proposed by Habermas is not unitary, but pluralistic. Power in general is not thought to be removed from any really existing arena, just the form of power – coercion and domination – which 'limits and disables democratic participation' (Dahlberg, 2005a: 123). The model can make room for different logics of reasoning and diverse communicative forms to take place and matter.<sup>4</sup> Scholars like Seyla Benhabib argue forcefully that a rejection is unwarranted. Deliberative democrats should not be fazed by those claiming translation between conflicting groups to be impossible – what Benhabib terms the strong incommensurability thesis; those who think gaps are too wide to be crossed do not realize that simply identifying the gaps illustrates how the distances are not that insurmountable (Benhabib, 2002: 135ff). A revised Habermasian theory, then, is held capable of permitting 'maximum cultural contestation within the public sphere' (Benhabib, 2002: ix).

Bernhard Peters (1994: 46–7) suggests a useful operationalization of such an ideal public sphere's fundamental characteristics. The parts that deal with the participants communicating and the content they communicate are: (1) *Equality and reciprocity*: everyone has an equal right to express themselves and be listened to, free of constraints. Reciprocity also entails a duty to listen to others.

(2) *Openness and adequate capacity*: the ideal public sphere is open for every theme or contribution. Importantly, the relevance of each input gets decided on in the sphere itself, nothing is excluded in advance. Adequate capacity applies to the sphere's ability to give the questions a satisfactory handling. This also requires participants able to allow for a fair treatment of all issues.

Assessing broadcasting against these criteria, it is clear that neither radio nor television offer equal access for participants. The role of speaker is reserved for the few. The one-way structure does not facilitate reciprocity in terms of direct dialogue. Further, a wide range of issues and contributions unavoidably gets excluded. Thus, the degree of openness may also be questioned. This objection holds broadcast media in any organizational form to neglect the requirements related to participation in the public sphere.

The solution, apparently, comes in shape of a communicative form more suitable for the society and the public sphere of today: dialogue. Dialogue is personal, two-way communication between people – seemingly the opposite of broadcasting. In the ideal dialogic form in the public sphere, participants' joint aim is to be mutually fair and open, also to new insights, and strive for reaching a collective decision (see Ytreberg, 2006: 135). As such, dialogue seems to make it possible to approximate the identified features of the ideal: first, it is easier to ensure access on equal terms and the requirement of reciprocity gets taken care of by default; second, dialogue might invite a more open communication with regard to range of issues, and a fair and competent treatment of these. Internet optimists find mediated communication that corresponds to these characteristics online.

### **The potential of online communication – and its problems**

In contrast to broadcasting's asymmetry, online communication offers balance. Speaker and listener are on equal terms. Internet-supported public spheres, presumably also eliminate impediments by removing barriers to participation, enabling a greater variety of active contributors. In addition, the communication has a dialogic form guided by a mutual expectation of uptake (Bohman, 2004: 133–9). Thus, the prerequisite of reciprocity is underlined.

The second criterion of an ideal public sphere, the claim for openness to a variety of issues and an adequate capacity to process them, meets a major obstacle in the sheer size of complex societies. Large publics mean few speakers and many listeners. Implicitly, the descriptions of internet optimists hint at a solution to this problem as well: a greater number of active participants and new communicative forms bring fresh and more diverse opinions to the surface. Also, specialized spheres strengthen the capacity to deal with the subject matter on satisfactory terms – in what is perceived as the normal pattern of communication. Thereby, online communication could assist in reaching a closer approximation of the ideal. This is the assumption behind

Coleman's (2004a) proposal, outlined above. Yet, in my view, it does not constitute a convincing justification of public service media online, nor does it help us envision its full potential.

Doing away with the impediments to the ideal is not such a straightforward operation as it seems. The growth of online communication changes nothing with regard to the identified requirements of the ideal public sphere. The number of actively participating speakers and the number of messages may increase but, given the same time budget, this will unavoidably lead to a decrease in the number of recipients of each message (Albrecht, 2006: 66; Peters, 1994: 52 n. 7). This may in turn conflict with the aim that all issues and contributions ought to receive as fair and competent a treatment as possible.

The point is, of course, valid across different media. Implications in everyday life are not hard to envision. We all have a limited amount of time and energy to spend on this kind of activity during a day. We can take in only so many online forum discussions, news stories or talk shows. If the numbers of discussions and broadcasts per day – and the number of speakers and contributions in each one – increases, the only way to ensure that every one is listened to is by decreasing the number of listeners. Fewer listeners does not always mean inferior treatment of the issue at hand. Nevertheless, for the media's role in the public sphere, the observation indicates a vital problem that may follow a transition from the dissemination of broadcast media to the claimed dialogue of online communication: the sweeping technological change related to digitalization of all parts of our media systems could assist and amplify a fragmentation of the public sphere into narrowly defined interest groups.

'The growing power of consumers to filter what they see' is often identified as 'the most striking power provided by emerging technologies' (Sunstein, 2001: 8). It becomes increasingly easier to pick and choose content. As a consequence, it becomes easier to exclude information, opinions and perspectives inconsistent with personal likes or conceptions. Optimists stress the potential for alternative public spheres to meet and mix. This could be described as a fruitful coexistence between publics of diverse sizes, with varied forms of identification and permanence (Dayan, 1999: 28–9; Downing and Husband, 2005: 210–13). Pessimists, on the other hand, warn against a balkanization of public debate (Murdock, 2005: 223; Sunstein, 2001).

Normative public sphere theory holds it as problematic if politically or socially defined groups vacate or are banished from the larger community. The outlook becomes worse if large communication channels are lacking, or do not provide room for meetings between intersecting interests and identities. At worst, only the second requirement to the media in a democratic society gets taken care of: dialogue is facilitated between isolated groups of citizens, but the dissemination of information relevant to all is neglected. Such a development emphasizes the latent problems with putting undue weight on dialogic communication in the public sphere. Dialogue, then, depends on the priority of a disseminative mode (Silverstone, 2007: 143). The

warnings need to be taken seriously – even though empirical research does not necessarily, thus far, support the most pessimistic claims (see Albrecht, 2006: 68).

Problematically, this discussion presupposes a dichotomy of dissemination versus dialogue, with broadcasting tied to the former and online communication characterized by the latter. To grasp the relationship between the different mediated forms, we need to move beyond this dichotomy and acknowledge the potential of online communication's disseminating features. This, in turn, can help us understand the possible legitimacy and functions of public service media online.

### **Broadcasting and dialogue**

Broadcasting is not merely one-way. Radio and television programmes have used direct feedback from listeners and viewers as an integrated part of their form for decades. Whether by mail or telephone, or by direct participation as audiences or contestants, the receivers have talked back and had their say. Recent widespread formats depend on the mobile phone as return channel for the audience to contribute their preferences. Despite questionable democratic potential and debatable impact on the future of television, such formats do include dialogically structured communication.

As radio and television production, distribution and reception is digitalized, it becomes technically easier and cheaper to 'open up' their traditional form and develop the broadcast media in a participatory direction. This goes for both different sorts of more or less sophisticated interactive services, and a range of participatory media formats (e.g. McNair et al., 2003). Notwithstanding political, economic and social impediments, this potential illustrates how broadcast radio and television may be utilized in ways that problematize strictly categorizing them as dissemination.

The form of individual programmes aside, broadcasting's mode of address shows further traces of dialogue, independent of digital technology. 'The early history of broadcast talk', notes Peters (1999: 217), 'consisted largely in the attempt to create a world in which audiences would feel like participants.' The senders tried to compensate for being one-way and distant by cultivating a sense of intimate relations with the public. On television, the continuation of the characteristics of the original live broadcast – liveness – is the most significant effort. '[T]elevision's direct address to viewers; the simulated eye contact; the questions posed on behalf of the viewer are all aspects that invoke the conversational form, and implicitly a simultaneous, present audience' (Johansen, 1999: 226, my translation; see also Peters, 1999: 218; Scannell, 2005: 132ff). It feels almost like meeting someone eye to eye. Television's dominant mode of address mimics dialogue.

This characterization of broadcasting is important for its contribution to the public sphere. Even more interesting when dealing with public service media

online is the question of whether a similar crossing of forms exists in online communication.

### **The internet and dissemination**

The disseminating form, I will argue, is present in a range of widely used internet services. First, consider websites. Among the plethora of amorphous types or genres is the personal homepage. On these, owners express themselves, typically through paragraphs of text, some photos and links (see Döring, 2002). A personal homepage works to communicate one's opinions or creative endeavours. Most of these pages 'live a quiet life with a few hits from the owners' good friends during a year, but many still find it meaningful to have their own display window on the net' (Fagerjord, 2006: 165, my translation). A personal homepage shows others what you are about. It tells anyone who cares to read it about your interests or hobbies. As such, the homepage can act as a means to disseminate information from one sender to the widest possible circle of readers.

This is even clearer if we consider a second broad category: websites from all kinds of administrative agencies, interest groups or commercial businesses. Crucially, they make relevant information available to all, be it background information about environmental issues, asylum seekers' rights, the newest offers for mattresses or plain contact information. In this form, online communication mainly informs – one-way. Both the sender's aim and the asymmetric relationship between sender and receiver correspond with the disseminative form.

Another relevant example is online news sites. Although they often facilitate diverse forms of feedback, their basic business idea involves spreading news – just like the analogue versions. Newspapers hold important disseminating characteristics. The same is true for their siblings on the internet. An overwhelming majority of online news users act as anonymous members of the public who do not contribute to the sites, and who want to be informed by relevant, interesting or entertaining stories (see Robinson, 2006). This is clearly the case even for expressively participatory outlets: Indymedia's slogan is 'Don't hate the media ... be the media'. In 2002, a prominent Indymedia technician and contributor asserted that only about 1 percent of the users of such open publishing websites actually supplied material (Arnison, 2002: n.p.). Many more contribute and can feed the senders with their input online than through broadcast media or offline newspapers. My point is that even alternative online news outlets by and large keep a structure in their communication and uses which, in significant ways, shares the characteristics of dissemination.

A fourth type of website is the blog. It stands out as more or less frequently updated, like an online diary, and by often making extended use of links and input from readers (Matheson, 2004: 448). Yet many blogs resemble personal

homepages in being utilized by someone to express themselves. Others look like activist news sites, and serve as outlets for political ideas and as spaces for discussions. In both cases, a blog might be a way to evade the filters of the mass media. A main objective could be to reach as many readers as possible – often with the help of other bloggers' links and comments. Though mechanisms and means surely differ, from a certain perspective, blogs take a disseminating form. This is even more evident with those written for instance by established politicians, like Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2006). A key rationale is to reach large publics quickly and directly.

Web-TV services could serve as a final example. At the outset, these stand noticeably apart from their offline ancestors, primarily concerning simultaneity: broadcast television as dissemination is distributed to the whole public at the same time. Web-TV is not. It has to be 'pulled down' by each individual user. Yet, the temporal dimension remains important: clearly, news shows or episodes of drama series only remain interesting for a limited period of time, even when distributed and accessed online. Likewise, to the extent that specific videos on user-generated sites break through to larger audiences, they too tend to have a short life-span. While archival functions are significant, the impact of web-TV in the public sphere remains highly dependent on an ability to spread instantly. Not disregarding the differences, web-TV shares important traits with broadcasting as dissemination. Both facilitate communication of audio-visual content one-way to a potentially great number of viewers. That goes for high-quality pay services from established commercial broadcasters, as well as for user-generated sites like YouTube – whose slogan 'Broadcast yourself' fuses the uses of personal homepages with the audio-visual.

I have emphasized some types of internet services. Others, like email or online encyclopedias, would fit my argumentation poorly. This does not undermine my basic thesis, however: as descriptions of communicative forms, neither dissemination nor dialogue is exclusive to any one technology, or way of organizing a medium. The functions of broadcast media and online communication need to be acknowledged for the characteristics they have in common, as well as for their individual peculiarities. In addition to their respective established functions, the tasks ascribed to broadcasting and online communication should be re-thought. One can imitate – even approximate – dialogue on broadcast radio or television, while reaching large publics simultaneously with a message via the internet. This has implications for the legitimacy, and potential reimits, of public service media online.

### **Public service media online**

A persistent criticism of the democratic function ascribed to broadcast media claims that radio and television never really addressed their listeners and viewers as citizens, but as consumers: from its inception, broadcasters did not

so much speak to the public as to audiences in private homes (Peters, 1999: 217–25). Setting out in search of the television public, Daniel Dayan returned with a qualified positive finding of what he called ‘an almost public’, for instance periodically or loosely linked to the media (Dayan, 2001: 762).<sup>5</sup> Even so, no form of address can eliminate the fact that broadcasting gave listeners and viewers an unprecedented feeling of being attached to their society or each other. It improved ‘most people’s ability to form their own opinions and make their own choices of actions on the basis of knowledge about culture and society’ (Gripsrud, 2002: 271). Further, the concrete ways of organizing broadcasting were vital for the role it came to play in the public sphere: the function was most explicitly articulated through public service broadcasting institutions in Western Europe.

Due to different historical developments, implementations of public service as a media policy tool have varied greatly between nation-states. This has stimulated a persistent discussion about the meanings and uses of the concept (see Jakubowicz, 2000). Divergence of institutionalizations, however, does not preclude identification of common core values. One shared aim is protection from both state and market. A recent comprehensive survey names universality, citizenship and quality as the central principles embodied within the concept (Born and Prosser, 2001). Such admittedly quite abstract values do at least underline the joint functions which continue to be ascribed to public service broadcasting in fairly diverse social and political contexts.

Arguments based on a normative Habermas-inspired public sphere theory have been criticized for seeing this form of broadcasting as ‘the most important or even the only vehicle for the fostering of democracy and citizenship’ (Jacka, 2003: 179; see also Collins, 2002: 65ff; Craig, 2000).<sup>6</sup> Crucially, public service broadcasting is but one media policy tool – an imperfect one at that – and cannot be seen in isolation. Still, the ideas behind it remain relevant in a digital media system, extended to new media platforms.

Different forms of online communication, I have argued, can be utilized to strengthen public dialogue and secure dissemination of relevant information to a citizenry. In so doing, online communication has the potential to contribute to both key tasks ascribed to media in a democracy. Yet, a first objection to the idea of public service media online as a policy tool could point to the wealth of information and forums available today, with few regulatory interventions. Civil society initiatives are blooming. Commercial providers offer a wide range of democratic and culturally important internet services. The market caters to a variety of tastes. In addition, it is certainly easier and cheaper to cater for marginal interests in a profitable way online than in broadcasting. How, then, can we justify privileging, or spending public money on, public service media online? And what could it look like?

In what turned out to be his last book, Roger Silverstone (2007: 12) described the public space of broadcast and online media as ‘contested’ and ‘cacophonous’. He continued: ‘It is indeed barely a space at all. It is dominated by a few multinational

companies who have managed to extend control based on their existing dominance within broadcast media into the otherwise open territories of the internet' (2007: 12). In news provision, to single out one aspect, leading commercial outlets tend to rely on a limited number and narrow range of sources – at worst they mix advertising with news or write news as consumer advice. In short, most commercial actors treat users as consumers, not citizens (Dahlberg 2005b: 170–2). Further, as for example Murdock (2005) argues, commercial actors promote enclosure. The companies behind the portals which dominate online in most Western countries do their best to build a walled garden around one site, or construct virtual colonies by providing links only to other sites the company controls (Dahlberg, 2005b: 163, 168). To realize the potential identified in online communication, clearly something needs to be done.

As I have stressed, normative public sphere theory holds the links between different cultural groups to be crucial. These connections may not be high on commercial actors', or specific interest groups', lists of priorities. Public service media online ought to help build such links and form a space where diverging interests can meet based on recognition of diversity. If positioned as independent from state powers and shielded from market forces, public service media online could be well-suited to fight marketization and state censorship (see Murdock, 2005). As in broadcasting, the policy tool cannot be seen in isolation online. It will not fix problems of exclusion and bias in itself, but it has the potential to make a valuable contribution.

Constructing arrangements that in diverse ways connect publics may ensure confrontation between inconsistent values and perspectives. Exploring how these connections can best be established and developed could be a key task for public service media online. The explorations may result in rich links between more or less isolated groups and help form spheres where different identities can connect. The bringing together of fragmented groups can be aided by online communication, in addition to broadcast media. In doing so, public service media on the internet must exploit the possibility for facilitating dialogue. Critically, this implies embracing existing terminals like PCs and mobile phones, as well as being open to future possibilities. Even though the television set remains central for everyday media use, the potential of online communication cannot be exploited through that terminal alone.

Facilitating dialogue online, however, is not enough. Public service media should also make use of the disseminating characteristics offered by the internet. This includes distributing and archiving audio-visual material, as well as utilizing different websites' potential for spreading the wide range of content traditionally associated with public service broadcasting. Only under such circumstances will the full potential of online communication and broadcasting be exploited. To grasp this potential, consider the arrangement outlined in relation to the requirements of equality and reciprocity, and openness and adequate capacity, in an ideal public sphere: they are easier to balance when we see broadcasting and online communication in connection.

Concretely, public service media online could for instance assist the articulation of opinions and perspectives in moderated discussion forums. As research has shown, the structures and outcomes of online dialogue depend on factors like the design, moderation and trustworthiness of the actual discussion space (e.g. Albrecht, 2006: 76). Well-designed spaces must be supported both by professionally produced background information and guides to an array of independent, external sources. Pointing to such sources could be made possible by extensive and sound application of hyperlinks which take the user outside the actor's site, thereby offering material that is both as complete and as wide-ranging as possible. This use of external links would be encouraged by the lack of commercial pressure. It would directly counter enclosure, and must permeate all aspects of the activities – including news provision.

Absence of commercial considerations would further facilitate the maintenance of search facilities. These need to stay clear of marketing-infused filtering methods and present an alternative to dominant existing actors. The aim must be to contribute to the construction of an 'open, multi-purpose space on the internet equivalent to urban parks' (Stewart et al., 2004: 353). Indicating an overall clear distance from commercial endeavours could yield a higher level of trustworthiness, and advance user-participation across services. It would also help defy processes of enclosure.

Advanced equipment like internet-ready PCs and third-generation compatible mobile phones are not only expensive, but also complicated to use. However, we should not approach this problem, I argue, by restricting public service media from exploiting their potential. Rather, it ought to be utilized as a policy tool precisely to minimize such obstacles. This underlines the continued need to see public service media in connection to wider social and cultural policy aims.

Importantly, the undertaking outlined here does not presuppose assessing the actual communication by an ideal of rational deliberation aiming at consensus. My argument does not rule out more confrontational modes of address. As John Ellis suggests, 'public service broadcasting can provide the forum within which the emerging culture of multiple identities can negotiate its antagonisms' (2000: 87). In a similar vein, Geoffrey Craig claims we need public service broadcasters to 'generally provide spaces for, and in turn articulate, the ongoing "crisis" which always constitutes the public life of a society' – a public life 'characterised by difference and incommensurability' (2000: 113, 112). Such a task could also apply online. For Craig, a model of agonistic democracy contributes an emphasis on ever-present issues of exclusion, as well as a richer understanding of the range of communication at hand in the public sphere. Yet, the task is not, as Craig argues, irreconcilable with a Habermasian theory. Public service media online can also be thought of as a meeting point for conflicting ideas and perspectives from such a stand. In my view, a rejection is neither needed nor desirable.

## Conclusion

This article has presented a case for public service media online. There is a potential in online communication, I have argued, not only for dialogue, but also for dissemination. Both should be explored by public service media online in a way that consistently counters processes of enclosure and balkanization in the public sphere.

I have not proposed a universal answer to the question of how to organize public service media online. As has been the case with earlier developments, the actual implementation must be resolved within the specific society to be serviced. My stand does not prescribe additional tasks for existing actors, nor does it assume the construction of new institutions. The role of different initiatives originating in civil society must definitely not be ruled out (e.g. Harrison and Wessels, 2005). Ultimately, such decisions have to depend on the media system into which new actors would enter, or in which existing ones would be allowed to evolve. Still, concrete implementations ought to have something in common: first, an understanding of how online communication's potential for dissemination, along with facilitation of dialogue, directs its employment for media policy, and, second, a grasp of the necessity to connect online and broadcast media in the field of public communication.

I do not imagine the scheme charted here would easily be implemented. The ideas go against the prevailing regulatory climate. Nevertheless, the understanding and tasks I have advocated may contribute to a more focused discussion about the challenges and possible employment of online communication in democratic societies. Political philosophy provides an important conceptual basis for this discussion. Given its normative force, an operationalized public sphere theory maintains an important heuristic role. It lets us discuss the degree of imperfection in existing conditions by identifying impediments to the ideals, and may thereby still ground criticism of democratic institutions. My analysis can serve as a foundation for studies which take a more 'grounded' approach to yield detailed evaluations of existing practices. Such studies could concentrate on gaining better understanding of our uses of applicable forms of online communication. They should also scrutinize the development of media policy, and of existing public service broadcasters' online services, in specific contexts.

## Notes

1. Peters' discussion primarily relates to private settings. Still, in a later book, when identifying exposure, information and participation as three pillars of thinking about communication and democracy, he does invoke the concepts of dissemination and dialogue (Peters, 2005: 281).

2. See Thomass (2003) and Born (2005) for other astute proposals.

3. Importantly, revisions are forced by the processes of globalization (see Fraser, 2007). My analysis assumes that nation-states still constitute the main container for societies' public spheres, and a principal arena for media policy.

4. The present article concentrates on the organization and structure of media, and their different communicative characteristics. Thus, a thorough treatment of the discussion about the ideal form of discourse in the public sphere is beyond its scope (see Benhabib, 2002: 133ff; Brady, 2004; Dahlberg, 2005a; Dahlgren, 2006: 276–81; Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006; Habermas, 2006; Karppinen, 2007; Mouffe, 2000, 2005). I hold the normative ideal capable of accommodating, and acknowledging the democratic importance of, different aesthetic-affective forms of discourse (see Dahlberg, 2005a: 129).

5. See Livingstone (2005) for a discerning analysis of the audience/public distinction.

6. Jacka's criticism seems to partly rest on an objection to any use of ideal types in empirical analysis. Referring to Mouffe's (2000, 2005) theory of agonistic democracy, she proposes a view of democracy as postmodern and pluralized, where the traditional public–private divide does not apply. Jacka's argument is flawed since a theory of agonistic democracy also prescribes ideal forms of communication in democracy (see Karppinen, 2007; also Garnham, 2003).

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