THE MEDIA AS A POWER FOR DEMOCRACY

COLIN SPARKS

Colin Sparks
is lecturer at the
Faculty of Law,
Languages and
Communication,
University of
Westminster,
235 High Holborn,
London WC1V 7DN.

Introduction

This essay is concerned to consider how far the common description of the press as one of the "powers" of government is helpful in understanding the role of the media in the contemporary world. As the term "Fourth Power" itself suggests, any discussion of this topic is necessarily concerned with the relations between the mass media and the exercise of power in a society. Power, in this context, is usually thought of as primarily political, but there can of course be many other forms which impact upon the lives of the population equally with, or even more acutely than, the deeds of governments and judges. Within that vast range of possible modalities of power, I am here concerned with those forms of power which are exercised in public social relations. Political power is certainly one of these, but there are forms of bureaucratic and economic power which also have this public character. It is self-evidently true that the exercise of power, either in the narrowly political sense or more generally, is not necessarily subject to any sanction or control.

My interest in this topic probably reflects a common-sense understanding of what is at stake in that it arises out of a concern with how the media may play a role in democratic political life. In my view, the mass media are necessarily constitutive of any adequate contemporary theory of political democracy. It is not possible to advance even the most limited and formal definitions of democracy which do not recognise the integral role of the media to the actual functioning of all of its elements. Whatever is of value in thinking about the media as a "power" is judged first and foremost in the light of this concern. While I thus begin from a consideration of the narrow question of government, the consequence of any serious attempt to explore what is at stake in this issue drives the debate onto the wider and more general terrain of public power in general.

This discussion therefore considers some of the historical circumstances surrounding the origin of the doctrine of the separation of powers before considering how this has come to be

extended to include the mass media. It then reviews the implications of the three different terms that are used to cover the same general area of concern and considers what they reveal about the contemporary world. Finally, an effort is made to sketch the outlines of a different usage that might address some of the problems discovered with the three existing terms.

Historical Origins

The classical doctrine of the separation of powers is commonly taken to originate with John Locke and to find developed form first in Montesquieu and then in *The Federalist Papers.* In fact, it seems to have been present, in essence if not in name, in much earlier political thought, being traced in some accounts back to Plato. In considering the application of the doctrine to the contemporary world, we need to bear in mind three important aspects of the political realities the separation of powers sought to theorise.

Given that it was, in substance, a reflection upon the constitutional arrangements of seventeenth and eighteenth century Britain, it is clear that it had only a tenuous relationship with any recognisable model of democracy. The executive power during that period was essentially in the hands of the monarchy which, despite the fact that it owed its position to the will of parliament, was based on the principle of hereditary rule. A powerful element, perhaps the most powerful element, in the legislature was the hereditary House of Lords. The only element subject to any kind of external sanction was the House of Commons. This was subject to periodic election by an extremely restricted gender and property-based franchise in which votes were commonly and publicly bought by candidates. Many seats were literally in the gift of powerful landed magnates.

Secondly, although in no way a democratic theory of politics, the separation of powers sought to embody in constitutional theory very real conflicts of interest. We may appreciate the issues at stake if we consider the disposal of military force. All participants in the British politics of the day held, for good historical reasons, to firmly Maoist principles about the relationship between political power and the barrel of a gun. In the early modern world, as is the case today, the use of military force was clearly the prerogative of the executive. To allow the monarch a free hand with this was widely recognised as tantamount to an invitation to tyranny and popery. Consequently, the deployment of military force was constrained by the most elaborate battery of laws. Military officers held their commission from the Crown. (They still do.) On the other hand, the power of the officers to enforce the obedience of their troops derived from the Mutiny Act, which formed the basis of military law. (It still does.) Unlike the vast majority of laws, the Mutiny Act was subject to annual renewal by parliament. Without the renewal of this Act, the Executive could not, in theory, run an army. The Crown's control of military force was thus placed on very short notice (Barnett 1974, 124-25). The fact was that parliament was frightened of kings: after all, it had had to use military force to depose two of them in the half-century between 1640 and 1690.

The separation of powers was one of the mechanisms by which parliament made sure that there could be no British equivalent of the despotisms of the European

continent. It was thus in essence a means by which the powers of any one constituent element of the British governing mechanism, and in particular that of the executive, could be circumscribed and kept under strict control by the other elements, in particular the legislature. In generalising the model to the USA, the judiciary, particularly the federal legal apparatus and the Supreme Court, came to have an important role in interpreting the written constitution which was absent or underdeveloped in the British prototype.

Thirdly, in its origins the doctrine had little or nothing to do with the press. Not only was the modern media two centuries away from the world of John Locke but that writing and publishing which one may conceivably claim as a precursor of contemporary journalism was usually very closely allied with political power. Insofar as it was independent of government, this was often because it was subordinated to an oppositional faction contesting for power. The range of material that the press was able to cover was very limited. In Britain, the reporting of parliament was not then normal and was of contested legality. It was established by means of a protracted struggle in the course of the Eighteenth century as a de facto privilege. The last concerted attempt to prevent the printing of the debates of the House of Common took place in 1771; that of the Lords in 1775. British citizens still today enjoy no right to the publication of the proceedings of their rulers in the press. Parliament retains the power to expel reporters and retains ultimate editorial power over the televising of its proceedings.

On all of these grounds, then, the doctrine of the separation of powers was in origin remote from the contemporary debates to which it has been applied. Understanding some elements of its origin is of more than antiquarian interest, however, since it is on to that original unpromising material that the role of the press has been grafted.

Power and the Press

There are three terms in common use that address the problem of the relationship between power and the press. These originated with the printed press but are today appropriate to all the mass media. The words "press" and "media" are used interchangeably in this essay except where a specific point about one or other medium is being made. The term most closely connected with the separation of powers is that of media itself as another "power". In Latin Europe, this usage is commonly rendered as the press as "Fourth Power". In some parts of central Europe it is as the "Seventh Power". In the Anglo-Saxon world, the common term is "Fourth Estate". More recently, the term "watchdog" has come to be used.

These different terms are not identical. Here, I discuss what I believe to be the conceptual differences between all three. The wide usage of these terms is unfortunately not connected to any developed body of literature concerning them. They are mostly employed in an uncritical and untheorised manner. There is nothing like the sort of detailed scholarly debate which has surrounded other related concepts like "public opinion", the "public sphere" or "civil society". Two of three specialist British dictionaries of communication make no reference to any of the terms (Williams 1976; O'Sullivan et al. 1983). The third gives what seems to this author a confused and garbled account of the term Fourth Estate (Watson and Hill 1989, 71). A recent US study, promisingly titled *The Fourth Estate and the Constitution*, offers no formal

definition of the term. It cites a prominent US judge of the 1970's as defining the "Fourth Estate model of the press ... protects the press as an autonomous, independent check on government" (Powe 1991, 261). The bulk of the chapter devoted specifically to this subject, however, is a discussion and defence of the US Supreme Court judgement in the Miami Herald case that the rights of newspaper editors with regard to publication are absolute. Representative historians of the media in both the USA and Britain use the term "fourth estate" in their discussions of the press, but they do so without offering any substantive definitions (Curran and Seaton 1988; Emery and Emery 1984).

What we are concerned with in this discussion are not fully fledged theories, concepts or ideas. They are perhaps best considered as slogans. In political life, slogans are the concrete expression of complex and developed analyses and they are consequent upon a high level of theoretical elaboration. This elaboration is wholly missing in most contemporary usage in this field and I have therefore attempted to extrapolate from the terms themselves to what I believe are the ideas underlying them. Because the operation involved is wholly hypothetical, I have called the resulting bodies of ideas "constructs".

There are obvious methodological problems with such a procedure and it is necessary to spell out precisely the ways in which I have undertaken my hypothetical reconstruction. I am concerned first with what may be considered spatial metaphors: what the terms tell us about the relationships between the media and, on the one hand, the three classical powers and, on the other, with the citizens of a particular state. Secondly, I am concerned to explore how far the term takes account of other possible power relations existing in society. Thirdly, I discuss the extent to which the different terms reveal anything about the power relations internal to media organisations. Fourthly, I look at how far each term is able to account for what I argue are important distinguishing feature of the contemporary world.

The Fourth Power

I am unable to trace the exact provenance of the term the "Fourth Power", but it is reasonable to assume that it issues out of political thought in a period when the doctrine of the separation of powers is already well established. That would place its origins at the earliest in the first quarter of the Nineteenth century. In respect of the relationships between the media and power, this term suggests the spatial outline given in Figure One.

Figure One			
Executive	Legislature	Judiciary	Press
(Civil) Society			
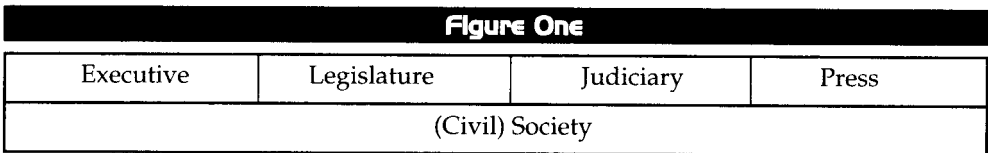
The three traditional powers in principle constitute the realm of the state. They have no necessary responsibility to anyone apart from themselves. Activities outside of the state are here termed "civil society", which is used in the classical sense to include private economic activities. The terminology of "fourth power" implicitly assimilates

the media to the same governing role distinct from civil society as that exercised by the other three powers.

The four elements of government in this construct are in principle independent of any external sanction. In actual practice, there have been varying degrees of control exercised by civil society over the various branches of government. During the period when the doctrine of the separation of powers was being formulated, even democratic control of the legislature through a limited male franchise was a rare and contested constitutional form. In the context of contemporary developed societies, it is common for there to be at least some form of de facto democratic electoral sanction over the activities of executive and legislature, but this was very far from the case until around the middle of this century. In some contemporary cases, most notably the USA, there is a modified and indirect electoral sanction over the appointment of members of the judiciary, although this is regarded as dangerous extremism in countries like Britain. We can therefore say that this construct has evolved in practice towards the possession of a limited democratic element.

The media is not, in this construct, necessarily subject to any form of external control, nor does it have any defined duties towards the citizens. There is, on the other hand, nothing that prevents the media being subjected to the same kinds of control as the other powers. It would, within the modern evolution of the construct, be reasonable to expect that some form of democratic control would be exercised by citizens over the media. Just as the franchise has been extended, and the scope of democratic control has been widened with respect to others of the three powers, so it could in principle be applied to the media. Amongst its limitations is that fact that the construct is silent about the relationship of the media to other forms of power in society. In particular, the possibility of internal power relations within civil society itself is quite absent. There is also no place for the possible power relations inside the media themselves.

In terms of its utility in the contemporary world, what this construct best describes is state sponsored broadcasting. This is the form of the mass media that is most clearly aligned with the governing powers in society. Its relationship is one of political and economic independence from control by the rest of society. The limitation of the construct with regard to broadcasting is that it has little to say about the relations between the different powers themselves.

Historically, we have argued, the separation of powers was a codification of different political interests which were in conflict one with another. In contemporary reality, it is often the case that state sponsored broadcasting is subject to a greater or lesser degree of interference and control from other governing powers, most usually the executive. Only in the case of an idealised public service broadcasting system would the conditions exist under which this construct would accurately describe a media institution which was a distinct part of the overall governing apparatus and at the same time independent of, and in conflict with, the other powers. The construct is thus a partial description of how some parts of the modern media are related to the processes of governing but it tends to obscure the extent to which this separate "power" is in fact a subordinate one. It is a theory of the mass media as part of what we may term the "power elite", and one that is in practice dependent upon the executive.

The Fourth Estate

The precise origins of the term "fourth estate" are less obscure than in the case of the "fourth power", but they are still a little confused. The first use of the term is attributed by the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations to two distinct sources. The first was Edmund Burke, as mediated through the writings of Thomas Carlyle. According to the latter, Burke said there were three estates in Parliament and that the press constituted a fourth. Thomas Babbington Macauly also referred to the press gallery of the House of Commons in using the phrase at around the same time.

Both these two accounts of the origin of the term render the press as part of the legislative process. In the English context, the three estates in parliament could only be the Crown, the Lords and the Commons, who separately discussed and approved legislation. (They still do.) The "estates" in the French Revolution also effectively became a legislative body. If the press is to be assimilated to the category of "estate", then the presumption must be that it too has legislative functions. This in fact was one of the claims made on behalf of the press during the period of the first use of the term. Because of the limited nature of the franchise, it was argued that the press had the unique virtue of representing the ordinary, unenfranchised citizen in the legislative process. This it did indirectly by its ability to organise and mobilise public opinion against arbitrary acts by the government. The journalist, freely mixing with the political elite, helped to shape the process of legislation (Boyce 1978, 23-29).

This construct of the press as a part of the British legislative process, albeit an informal one, and the various relations of responsibility which follow from it may be represented by Figure Two.

Figure Two

Crown	Lords	Commons	Press
		Electors	?

In this diagram, only the Commons has a clear external responsibility: to the electorate that periodically renews its mandate. (In the historical context, this was an extremely limited group of men, but is today all the adult citizens of the UK and citizens of Ireland living therein.) The Crown and the Lords, both elements embodying the hereditary principle, have no determined external responsibility.

Archaic constitutional practices are a British speciality and it is, of course, possible to point to other examples in which both the wholes of the legislature and the executive are subject to periodic electoral sanction. The USA is an obvious case in point. This, more widespread, contemporary development of the original idea would lead to a modification of the above representation as shown in Figure Three.

Figure Three

Executive	Upper House	Lower House	Press
Electors			?

The exact details of these constitutional arrangements might vary — for instance there may be a unicameral legislature — but the distinct and problematic state of the media would remain. The press may have an external responsibility, but there is nothing in the theory itself which makes clear in principle to whom that responsibility would be. The two obvious possibilities are the electors (or more widely the denizens of a country) and the owners of the media.

Both the context of the original remarks and the general supposition of the democratic tradition is that this responsibility either is, or should be, discharged in the first instance to the citizens. This approach would lead to a consideration of the mass media as primarily part of the political process. The other possibility, that the media's first responsibility is towards their owners, puts them in the same case as any other form of property: the owner may dispose of them at will. In practice, with those contemporary large-scale media which are commercially financed, this tends to mean that they are run primarily as businesses. If we leave aside the extent to which the media in any concrete instance actually does discharge either version of this duty of responsibility, it remains to notice that media in this model is clearly set apart from the ordinary citizen and is assimilated to the political process itself. This, then, is another elite theory of the media.

There has also been an interesting evolution in the interpretation of the functions of the media in this context. As I have argued, one of the main functions of the media in the period when this term was coined was seen as providing a voice and political influence for the disenfranchised. As adult suffrage was gradually achieved, this expressive and representative function seems to have receded and the emphasis has come to be placed on the investigative and enlightening role of the media. There has thus been a reversal of the spatial direction of responsibility in the above schema. In its classical formulations, one part of the press's claim to be an estate was that it represented the disenfranchised in the deliberations of the representatives of the enfranchised. In the modern usage, it supervises the work of the representatives on behalf of the enfranchised.

This construct, like the first, is silent about the relationship between the media and other forms of power and has nothing to say about relations of power which might exist within the media themselves. This latter problem would be a serious one if it were found that in the contemporary context that the large scale media were in fact run primarily as businesses and thus tended to exhibit those conflicts between owners and employees which are often present in such enterprises.

The problem of the silence of the construct with regard to the relationship between the media and other forms of power is immediately apparent if we seek the best contemporary examples of the media this kind of construct helps to describe. They are those in which the media have a didactic role in winning consent for the adoption or rejection of one kind of policy or another. It follows from this construct that the media, as part of the political apparatus, also pursue political agendas. Clearly, uncontentious examples of this, like health education campaigns, are very widespread in all kinds of media. The enlightened elite in the media co-ordinates its efforts with the enlightened arms of government to educate the population about the virtues of contraception, or safe sex, or giving up tobacco, cutting down on saturated fats, or whatever.

There is, however, a more general didacticism that this model describes: the possible role of the mass media in winning consent for more general, and more contested, political objectives. This problem is sharply illustrated by the entry of the owners of the mass media into the political process itself. The most extreme contemporary example of this version of the theory is, of course, Berlusconi, but it is a widespread practice of the printed press in many countries, including the UK. In situations such as that, the actual role of the mass media is to act as a propagandist on behalf of the powerful to influence the opinions and actions of the population.

This kind of personal intervention of media owners into the centre of the political arena is arguably relatively rare. It is certainly the case, however, that they, and their senior journalistic employees, commonly mix with the political elite proper, and that there is sometimes an interchange of personnel. The universe of debate, the boundaries of the possible, the nature of the desirable end of political action are all frequently shared by the various constituents of the elite and press discourse become, more or less unconsciously, propaganda for those assumptions. Thus, in practice, the presumed contemporary duty to enlighten the citizens may be obscured by the integration of the media into the sphere of the politically and economically powerful.

The Watchdog

The third possible construct is that of the "watchdog" function of the press, in which the press acts on behalf of the public in order to bring to its attention any abuses of power. This, more demotic, version has the distinguishing feature that it does not base itself on a primary relation between the press and political power as do the other two. On the contrary, in principle the press here acts as watchdog equally with respect to all forms of power in society. The objects of its attentions may be political, economic or bureaucratic. In this construct, the press is outside of the political process proper. It is a distinct and special social actor occupying a sort of social space between the various agencies of power and the public, on whose behalf it acts. We may represent it diagrammatically as in Figure Four.

Figure Four			
Legislature	Government	State bureaucracy	Economic power

Press

The Public
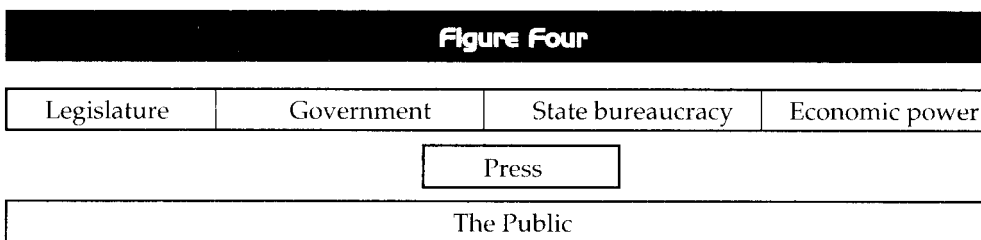
There is, in principle, no question of responsibility or accountability in this construct, which assumes that the press is motivated in its activities by its own volition. The motive for these beneficial acts is located either with the civic virtue of the journalists or in the commercial value of such journalism. The major open question in this construct is whether the press is, so to speak, equidistant from the agencies of power and the public or whether it is nearer to one or the other. It may be the case that the press functions as a watchdog on behalf of the public as against the possible abuses of power by its wielders, and it is this version that is prominent in democratic theory. It

is possible, however, to conceive of the role of the media as being primarily designed to draw the attention of the powerful to threats and opportunities maturing amongst the public.

This construct does not describe the media as a part of the elite, but it does make a clear distinction between the mass media and the population as a whole. It positions the media as a third term between the two blocs of public and power. It is, further, silent about any possible power relations internal to the media themselves.

As a description of the media in contemporary society, this version gives us the best purchase on the activities of relatively marginal media. This is true in three senses. In the first place, it is difficult to claim that the mainstream mass media play the watchdog role on behalf of the public in any systematic and continuous way. To take the exception to prove the rule: while we all remember Watergate, one of the reasons is that for two decades it has remained the sole major example of the US press playing this role. Had there been a succession of similar actions on the part of the mass media, then we could expect that this single incident would be less clearly engraved in our memories. There are examples of the mass media playing this role, but a glance at the output of the mass media in most developed countries would demonstrate that this is relatively infrequent and exists alongside a great deal of other material which is dedicated to different ends.

Secondly, there are small scale media in many societies which do seek to play the role of watchdog for the public on a more or less systematic basis, but they are usually obscure and uninfluential. Thirdly, there are small-circulation elite publications which do attempt to play a watchdog role for the powerful, particularly with respect to their competitive economic position. Neither of these latter groups of publications, however, are comparable in the scope and scale of their operations with the mainstream mass media.

In practice, this construct is a partial and one-sided idealisation of one of the functions that the mass media sometimes plays in a contemporary society.

Towards an Adequate Contemporary Account

It is obvious that what is at stake in all of these discussions, even if seldom clearly articulated, is the extent to which the mass media act to inform the public about the doings of their rulers. It is implicit in the very publicness of the media themselves, irrespective of their precise relations with the rest of society. This is clearly central to any viable theory of democratic life. None of the common terms discussed above seems to provide an adequate account of the behaviour of the mass media today. If it is agreed that the normative intent of all the three terms remains valuable, then we need to seek a better way of thinking about the problems involved. We need to begin not with the slogan but with the intellectual underpinnings of a new view.

Such a theory would have to take into account the real conditions of existence of the mass media in the contemporary world in order to understand which conditions might enable them to fulfil this function and which impede it. I shall call this the "public enlightenment" function of the media. It is clearly the case that this is not the only function which is present in the bulk of the contemporary media. One prominent function that points to different ends is the "business function". Another, whose

function is ambiguous but which often comes into conflict with the public enlightenment function, is the entertainment functions. A fourth, which is often thought to be peculiar to the socialist press but is in fact partially present in many different kinds of media, is the organising function. It cannot be assumed that all of these functions exist in symbiotic mutual support. As we have seen, the classical terms provide little purchase on possible conflicts between these functions.

Some of the problems with the classical terms which lead to their distance from contemporary reality are extremely well known. When the terms were first being advanced, the reality of the press, at least in the UK, hardly corresponded to the noble image attributed to it. There was, on the one hand, a legal press with a very small circulation. The condition for its legality was that it paid a government duty whose effect was to place it beyond the means of all but the rich. Very often, this press was subsidised by the government or by another political faction. It was, in fact, the proponents of this kind of press who argued most coherently for the press as "fourth estate" as part of an attempt to legitimise themselves (Boyce 1978, 20). Larger in circulation were the illegal "unstamped" papers. Because of their refusal to pay the "taxes on knowledge", these papers were affordable to the poor and were in fact very closely linked in programme and personnel with the nascent radical working class movement (Hollis 1970). While it would be difficult to claim that the first group of newspapers as a whole played a role of public enlightenment, the latter certainly did. Fulfilling the public enlightenment function was, at the birth of the modern press, a criminal activity carried out by left-wing subversives who were vigorously persecuted by the state.

While this radical press has successors in the margins of the contemporary press, it was very far from being the direct precursor of the core of the mass media today. It differed in four important respects from contemporary mainstream media with whom any new theory must be centrally concerned.

In the first place, although these newspapers were run as businesses by their owners, their public enlightenment functions were almost their sole activity. Textually, these papers were devoted to the serious business of reporting on the political situation of their day and to exposing the crimes of the rich and powerful. Printing a poem by Shelley was about as far as concessions to the entertainment functions of the press ever went.

In this, they clearly differ quite radically from the bulk of the contemporary media, which have in varying degrees developed their entertainment functions to at least as great an extent as their enlightenment ones. It seems that in normal circumstances those media that devote the greater part of their content to entertainment are more successful at gaining large audiences than those that are devoted to public enlightenment. The discharge of the enlightenment functions of the media has to compete for resources and space with a host of other functions

Secondly, the radical press was wholly dependent upon the direct efforts of its readers. In part, this was due to economics. While the legal press carried advertising, the radical press did not. This was partly because there was also a tax on advertising which tended to price papers carrying it out of the reach of the poor. It was also partly because the readership, although much larger than that of the legal press, was very

poor indeed and not at all attractive to advertisers.

The other reason why the radical press was so dependent on its readers was because of its illegal status. In order to be produced and distributed, it needed the active complicity of large numbers of people who helped it to evade seizure and prosecution. This kind of newspaper was only possible in such an organic relationship with its audience.

The contemporary mainstream press is clearly in a different case. It is not only partly funded by advertising, but its model relationship with its readers is restricted to pure commodity exchange. The audience pays its subscription and the fully finished product drops regularly through the letterbox. The major concession to "audience participation" is the letters page. All the rest of the production and distribution of the paper takes place on a wholly paid basis and is done by people who have professional specialisations in the various aspects of media production.

The third major difference is that while the radical press was usually written by its owner, sometimes with the help of his family or close political associates, the contemporary press is almost entirely produced by professional journalists who are employees of the owner. It is true that the early radical press carried material written by others, but these were not usually professional journalists. They were sometimes other political activists, like the author whose first publication in English was translated to open with the phrase "A hobgoblin is haunting Europe". Sometimes they were the readers of the paper who sent reports of their activities and plans. There were no large teams of hired journalists whose sole activity was to produce the paper, and who needed no personal intellectual commitment to its direction, as is the norm in the contemporary media.

The fourth major difference was that the early modern press, in both its legal and illegal versions, saw the state as the main object of its critique. While it was quite true that the radical press also had a developing critique of the new powers of industrial capital, political power was central to their concerns. In this, they undoubtedly reflected an important aspect of their times: the state was immeasurably bigger and stronger than any other force. In the contemporary world it is commonplace to recognise that the state now has competitors in the form of large scale businesses. It is even argued, with some degree of exaggeration, that the national state is now obsolete and that all power resides with transnational corporations. Even if we may question such a conclusion, it is clear that any modern theory must give at least equal importance to the question of economic power as to that of political power. Indeed, in a capitalist democracy it should pay more attention to the former since it is in principle not subject to popular sanction while political power is.

If we take these important differences into account, we can begin to produce a new spatial map of the public enlightenment construct along the lines we examined in the other three cases. An approximation would be as shown in Figure Five.

In this account, while there is a distinction between political and economic power, they both exist at the same level. We might also add that they both have a well-developed bureaucratic dimension. The boundaries between the managers of state media (for example, much broadcasting) and political power on the one hand, and the owners of private media (for example, most newspapers) and economic power

on the other hand, are not firm and definite. There is at least the possibility that the owners and controllers of the media are also powerful actors in the politics and economics of a country.

Figure Five		
Political Power		Economic Power
State Media		Private Media
Media Employees		Media Employees
The Public		
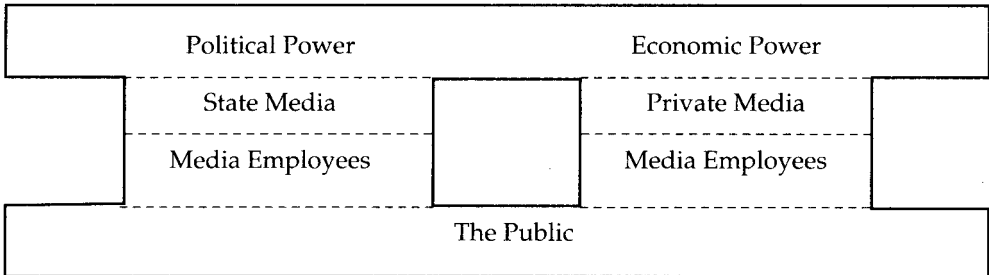
Similarly, inside the mass media, there is a distinction, but not a clear divide, between the owners and managers on the one hand and the employees on the other. The former have duties to their political masters or their shareholders as their primary consideration. The latter have, in principle at least, a primary responsibility to the medium for which they work. The boundary between the employees and the public is, like that between power and the owners and managers, a much less distinct one than between the two intra-media groups.

This description of the place of the mass media relative to the political and economic processes of society is one that attempts to account for some of the major features of the contemporary world. It attempts to take account of the multiplicity of different kinds of public power existing in society and the multiplicity of different, and perhaps conflicting, functions of the modern mass media. If it is at all accurate, then certain conclusions would seem to follow from it:

1. Concerning public enlightenment, there is a two-way pull on the mass media between their responsibility to the powerful and their responsibility to the citizens. These pressures are the unavoidable accompaniment of a situation in which large-scale media exist in societies whose most obvious characteristic is wide disparities of political and economic power. If the pull of the powerful sections of society prevail, which seems normally to be the case, then the media will only discharge their public enlightenment functions in intermittent and limited ways.

2. In the state media, the pull from above is expressed in the constant daily pressure that the political apparatus exerts upon them. This does not imply the widespread existence of political intervention in the daily running of the media. While this is certainly present in, for example, many state broadcasters, it is not necessary to suppose that it is always and everywhere the norm. Even if we assume that there are societies in which it never occurs, it is still possible that there would be an indirect and pervasive form of pressure transmitted through the general political culture of the society in question. Broadcasting in Britain is a good example of this. There are certainly direct political interventions in the programmes of both public and commercial broadcasters. While these have admittedly become more frequent over the last decade or so, it remains the case that they are not daily occurrences. Such

interventions do, however, help to set a climate of subservience for the broadcasters that acts against their public enlightenment functions. So, too, the dominance of certain kinds of economic and social ideas within the political elite, irrespective of parties, has led to an adaptation of the strategies of the broadcasters whose leaders very often share those ideas themselves.

3. In the commercial media it is the need to meet an adequate return on capital which is the primary and irremovable pressure upon the media institutions. Again, while there are well-known examples of direct intervention in editorial policy, we do not need to assume that this is commonplace to sustain such a theory. In the long run, it is probable that the need to maximise certain kinds of readers will lead to editorial judgements that marginalise dissent and which prioritise entertainment above enlightenment. This, for example, is manifestly the case in the majority of British national daily newspapers, which hardly devote any space to material of relating to public enlightenment. To the extent that there are newspapers that find it in their commercial interest to carry this kind of material, they try to restrict their readership to the relatively wealthy through a range of economic and cultural mechanisms.

4. The condition for mass media that are subject to such strong political and commercial pressures to exercise their public enlightenment functions at all is that the various kinds of political and economic power are not wholly co-ordinated and unified. In the absence of any countervailing force from outside the elites, then it is only in the conditions in which those groups themselves are in conflict that space will open up for the pursuit of a limited version of public enlightenment. One contemporary example of that in Britain is that sections of the printed press conduct campaigns against the European Commission. The latter is certainly a massive, unresponsive and undemocratic bureaucracy and the exposure of its doings is in the interests of public enlightenment. The reason for this concentration on Brussels rather than the abuses of power of the British state itself is that a number of popular papers in Britain are aligned with Rightist groups within the political and economic elite who are hostile to further European integration. This minority group within the elite as a whole is attempting to use the shortcomings of the European Commission as a weapon to gain popular support for a more isolationist project. This division opens the space for the kinds of enlightening material which one does not normally find in these newspapers.

5. It is to the journalists and other media employees that democratic theory must turn for any hope of an independent media. If there is a countervailing force to the influence of the powerful, it can only come from the efforts of the less powerful to express their own concerns and put forward their own agendas. Inside large-scale media there are many people whose upbringing, education, conditions of life and general experiences place them much closer to the ordinary citizen than to the owners and managers of the media. It is with them, if with anyone in the media, that the possibility for a critical and independent perspective might be found.

To argue this does not imply that all of those who work for the media are conscious supporters of some high ideal. On the contrary, as individuals they are under pressures from their superiors. It may well be that some of them aspire to promotion and tailor their views accordingly. Others might wholly internalise the political or

commercial ethos of the media and make it part of their professional persona. However, insofar as their social position approximates more closely to that of the public, they are under pressure to share the concerns of the public.

It is in this light that the professional self-images of journalists and other media workers are important. It is arguable that the very constitution of the persona of the "professional journalist" is one that acts to separate those holding it from any identification with the public at large. Such a conception is naturally disabling to any tendency to identify with the public and to put its concerns at the centre of the media. On the other hand, insofar as they have a professional commitment to the theoretical place of their occupation in the democratic order, journalists and others are also under a pressure that counters the political and commercial pressures from above. There is, at the root of the popular conception of media "professionalism", a contradiction that exposes its adherents to conflicting pressures. It is in this context, precisely as a political slogan, that terms like "fourth estate", "fourth power" and "watchdog" have a genuinely democratic function. Despite their theoretical limitations and their distance from the actual practice of the media, they form a widely diffused articulation of the aspiration towards public enlightenment on the part of media employees. They are thus of some utility in attempts to wrest the media from the control of the powerful.

We can see some small examples of these possibilities if we examine the daily functioning of the mass media in more detail than is usually the case in the grand debates about the media and democracy. An outstanding example from Central Europe concerns the role of Czechoslovak television in the Velvet Revolution. It was the employees of television who, by organising a strike committee and threatening to pull the plugs on all programming, forced the regime to broadcast reports of the demonstrations in Wenceslas Square.

Another example comes from Britain. During the Gulf War, censorship reached ludicrous heights: the BBC even banned a popular record titled *Boom Bang-a-Bang*. It was ordinary journalists and other media employees who organised **Media Workers Against the War** to fight the one-sided presentation that was dominant. It is relatively easy to show how, in collapsing dictatorships and in stable capitalist democracies alike, the pressures of the censor and the proprietor are met with resistance from media workers. It is their activities, on the mundane level as well, which constitute the possible starting points for public enlightenment.

Conclusion

We may say in general that it is government and proprietors who have an interest in ensuring that the media depart as far as possible from the underlying inspiration that lies behind the different positions discussed above. For government, and the state more generally, the most positive version of their role towards the media is one of benign incorporation. For the proprietors, the positive version of their role is the socially responsible pursuit of profit. Despite these constant limitations, the inspiration itself remains a good and valuable one, and deserves to be better theorised.

I have tried to sketch here the very schematic outline of such a better theory. It begins from the perception that, in the prevailing forms of society, the scale of the mass media means that they are themselves significant centres of powers and that they stand

in close relationship to other centres of political and economic power. The very fact, however, that those power relations are as much internal to the mass media as they are external features of the society upon which they must report and comment means that a potential exists for the media to be pulled either way.

The question for those of us who are concerned with ensuring that the media approximate as closely as possible to the ideal of public enlightenment is to find ways to strengthen the hand of those within the media whose social position brings them closest to the mass of the public. To this end, we need to examine the possibility of legal protection for media workers against pressure from their employers to pursue ends other than those of public enlightenment. We need also to develop an account of the profession of media worker which provides a legitimising ideology for both the functions of public enlightenment and the need to sustain that in defiance of pressures from the powerful. Most importantly, we need to find ways of assisting media workers in developing the organisation and self-confidence which will enable them to resist the pressures from above, both on the grand occasions of formal intervention by owners or politicians in the handling of sensitive matters and in the daily routines of media production in which the norms of subservience and obedience are naturalised.

I would not claim in this short essay to have done anything more than to provide a first and tentative mapping of these problems. I shall be very glad if others produce better and more sophisticated accounts of the ways in which, in contemporary society, the media can begin to act as a check upon the powerful and a facilitator of the public.

References:

Barnett, Corelli, 1970. *Britain and Her Army: 1509-1970. A Military, Political and Social Survey*. London: Allen Lane.

Boyce, George. 1978. The Fourth Estate: The Reappraisal of a Concept. In G. Boyce, J. Curran, and P. Wingate (eds.), *Newspaper History: From the 17th Century to the Present Day*, 19-40. London: Constable.

Curran, James and Jean Seaton. 1988. *Power Without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*. (Third Edition). London: Routledge.

Emery, Eddin and Michael Emery. 1984. *The Press in America: An Interpretive History of the Mass Media* (Fifth Edition). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Hollis, Patricia. 1970. *The Pauper Press: A Study in Working Class Radicalism of the 1830s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

O'Sullivan, Tim, John Hartley, Danny Saunders and John Fiske. 1983. *Key Concepts in Communication*. London: Methuen

Powe, Lucas A., Jr. 1991. *The Fourth Estate and the Constitution: Freedom of the Press in America*. Berkeley, Ca: University of California. Press.

Siebert, Frederick S. 1952. *Freedom of the Press in England 1476 - 1776*. Urbana, Il: University of Illinois Press.

Watson, James and Anne Hill. 1989. *A Dictionary of Communication and Media Studies*. London: Edward Arnold.

Williams, Raymond. 1976. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. London: Fontana.

COLIN SPARKS

MEDIJI KOT MOČ ZA DEMOKRACIJO

POVZETEK

Razprava se loteva vprašanja, koliko lahko običajno obravnavanje tiska kot ene izmed "moči" vladanja pripomore k razumevanju vloge medijev v sodobnem svetu. Kot sugerira izraz "četrta moč" (Fourth Power), je razpravljanje o tem vprašanju nujno povezano z odnosi med množičnimi mediji in uporabo — predvsem, ne pa izključno politične — moči v družbi. Pri uporabi klasične doktrine ločitve moči moramo danes upoštevati tri pomembne vidike: 1. Ker je nastanek doktrine povezan z ustavnimi ureditvami 17. in 18. stoletja, je le ohlapno povezana s katerimkoli prepoznavnim modelom demokracije. 2. Čeprav ločitev moči ne predstavlja demokratične teorije politike, je v ustavno teorijo prinesla tematizacijo realnih interesnih konfliktov. 3. V času nastanka ta doktrina ni imela nikakršne zveze s tiskom. Problem odnosov med tiskom oz. mediji in močjo se izraža v treh , v sodobnosti pogosto uporabljanih izrazih. Ideji ločitve moči je najbližje pojmovanje medijev kot posebne "moči" . V latinski Evropi je za tisk uveljavljen izraz "četrta moč" (Fourth Power), ponekod v srednji Evropi tudi "sedma moč" oz. "sedma sila" (Seventh Power). V anglosaškem svetu je običajen izraz "četrti stan" (Fourth Estate). V novejšem času se je uveljavil izraz "pes čuvaj" (watchdog). Pomeni teh izrazov nikakor niso identični, žal pa so običajno uporabljani povsem nekritično, kar je povezano tudi z odsotnostjo sistematičnega proučevanja. Ti izrazi tudi ne predstavljajo razvitih teorij, pojmov ali idej; prej bi jih lahko šteli za gesla, iz katerih naj bi "ekstrapolirali" ideje, ki so jim podlaga. Taka hipotetična "rekonstrukcija" vključuje proučevanje: 1. odnosov med mediji , tremi "klasičnimi močmi" in državljani v smislu nekakšne "prostorske metafore", 2. drugih možnih odnosov moči v družbi, 3. odnosov moči znotraj komunikacijskih organizacij in 4. koliko posamičen izraz vključuje pomembne specifične značilnosti sodobnih odnosov. Očitno je v tem proučevanju ključno, čeprav redko artikulirano vprašanje, koliko mediji informirajo javnost o delovanju akterjev moči. To je implicirano v javnem značaju samih medijev, ne glede na njihov specifičen odnos do "ostanka družbe", in je osrednjega pomena za

vsako veljavno teorijo demokracije. Noben izmed treh običajno uporabljanih izrazov pa ne vključuje sodobnega delovanja množičnih medijev. Če ni sporen normativni namen the izrazov, potem je potrebno ustrezneje osmisliti probleme, ki jih vključujejo. Pri tem ne gre za geslo, pač pa za intelektualno podstat novega pogleda, ki je usmerjen k idealu "javnega razsvetljenstva" in h krepitvi položaja tistih "medijskih delavcev", ki jih družbeni položaj najbolj približuje javnosti.