GLOBALISING NETWORK PUBLIC SPHERES

THE DISSOLUTION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE INTO PRIVATE ATTENTION MARKETS

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Abstract

The trend of the 1970s and 1980s of the previous century, which led to the so-called TV-society with para-social interactions, now has led to an all-invasive mediatisation and the dissolution of the public sphere into private attention-markets. Within this framework, only a few questions can be raised: (1) What do these trajectories imply for journalists who want to inform about distinct, controversial topics? (2) How far do new information and communication technologies advance the preparation and framing of public discourses – or do they implement a fundamentally new coding of amusement and commercialisation of attention markets? (3) How can the negligence of our conceptions of our pasts and of our futures be overcome in the up-to-the-moment news show business? These questions shall be pursued before their cross-linked answers (4) lead to a sketchy elaboration of Jürgen Habermas' traditional concept of "a public sphere in appearance only" and an equally sketchy combination of Habermas' and Castells' theories for a more reality-adequate concept of globalising network public spheres.

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More and more people worldwide grow up with mediated worldviews: mixtures of sounds, images, music, and texts; of self-portrayals, PR, advertising, propaganda, docufiction, and info-/edutainment; of dis-/information via and in terms of print media, radio, television, computer screens, and game boys or Nintendo Wii-interactive. Integrated into this media world are immediate experiences, fully sensual and not only mono- or bi-sensual. For any type of everyday and extraordinary experience, like parental love or the Oedipus complex, kitchen furniture or cooking, playing, sport or dying, there are media multiplications, modifications, and exaggerations. These "parallel media worlds" interpret and code experience patterns and behaviour models in life worlds colonised by, and interpenetrated by mass and network media, and constitute collective imaginations.

Television is no longer only a window to the world, but a part of it; Windows functions as an expanded symbols and rules system, which has become a mode of self-expression and para-social interaction. Parents, teachers, priests, supervisors – children, students, believers, and staff members: all of them find for themselves, and their actual counterparts or significant others, media-predefined social types, so that the trend of the 70s and 80s of the previous century, which led to the so-called TV-society with para-social interactions, now has led to an all-invasive mediatisation (Livingstone 2008) and the dissolution of the public sphere into private attention-markets and globalising network public spheres.

Within this framework, only a few questions can be raised: (1) What do these trajectories imply for journalists who want to inform about distinct, controversial topics? (2) How far do new information and communication technologies advance the preparation and framing of public discourses – or do they implement a fundamentally new coding of amusement and commercialisation of attention markets? (3) How can the negligence of our conceptions of our pasts and of our futures be overcome in the up-to-the-moment news shows' business? These questions shall be pursued before their cross-linked answers (4) lead to a sketchy elaboration of Jürgen Habermas' traditional concept of "a public sphere in appearance only" (Habermas 1962, in English 1989, 171), and an equally sketchy proposal for the new concept of globalising network public spheres.

Mixed Messages in the "Gratuitous" Shopping Mall

For many topics and presumptions about what is "self-evident" and "important," most journalists do not only rely on their academic and professional expertise, but also on their commonsensical experiences and convictions. These "news values" often decide the outcome when there is doubt (e.g., Ludes 2001). But into this continuity of national media (Thussu 2006) operate "upheavals of media information" at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. The socialisation of most contemporary media professionals has been shaped (since childhood exposure) by dominant experiences with screen media (as compared to print media). Increasingly mixed symbol systems, with higher ratios of moving images, frame and shape the narration- and explanation-patterns of issues and reasons no longer questioned, but naturally accepted. Questions concerning the "who, what, when, where, how, and why" are no longer posed and answered in terms of linear texts. Who must be shown, and is presented in personalised ways, what fits into genres and hybrid genres, when for the most part must be now, how

must be exciting, and why is increasingly neglected – because it is harder to show and would need some investigative journalism.

Media businesses sell potential attention to advertising clients. As Habermas concluded in 2007 (4, my translation):

> *From a historic perspective, the notion to control the market of press products holds something contra-intuitive. The market once constituted a stage on which subversive thoughts could be emancipated from governmental repression. But the market can only fulfill this function as long as the economic laws do not intrude into the pores of cultural and political contents, which are to be spread through the market. This diagnosis is still the correct core of Adorno's critique of the culture industry. Suspicious observation is necessary because no democracy can afford a market failure in this sector.*

But what does this "dual-upheaval" of the screen-media-socialisation combined with the commercialisation of media mean for those journalists, who nevertheless try to focus on distinct, controversial topics: with outstanding political, economic, military, ecological, or scientific expertise? One answer is in the education of journalists for these new occupational challenges, for example, in adequate specialised project seminars, a network of investigative journalists, and moral courage throughout their entire working life.

Education and learning by doing demand increasingly conscious complementarities between confidential conversations, (participating) critical observation and the evaluation of documents, press products (occasionally whole books or lengthy reports), TV programs, and inter- and intranet offers, especially regarding expensive databases. If there is to be a trend towards substituting the first-mentioned information- and background knowledge-sources through the last-mentioned ones, instead of only using them as complements, then systematic distortions emerge (Meyen et al. 2008; Deuze 2008). Insofar as these distorting replacements are taken for granted by the representatives of recent generation cohorts, and are legitimised by time shortage, an "appearance-public" emerges, whose journalistic experts contribute to perpetuating this distortive public. This trajectory, moreover, gains the appearance of being gratuitous ("not free beer, but free information for all"), because the hidden extra costs of the goods, which are advertised, are hardly ever systematically picked up as a central journalistic theme. Strategically planned multiple usages of infotainment (Thussu 2007) diverge increasingly from quality journalism and expert knowledge. Therefore, the new information and communication technologies need to be conceived as well, or as badly as means of disinformation and excommunication.

Dis-/Information and Ex-/Communication

In most post-industrial societies the media usage, consumption, and participation balances relocate from personal experiences, to mass media consumption and interactive network media, which are increasingly mobile. What achieves and maintains attention, for how long and how intensively, whom to trust, and how contradictions, contra-sentences and counter-evidence are deleted or screened, is consistently shifted, individually, in groups and networks. Stocks of common knowledge and relevance hierarchies, of basic assumptions and experiences based

on and contributing to common sense, will be continuously spread multi- and intermedially. Yet, they will also become less binding because traditional institutions, which convey culture techniques and general knowledge, like kindergartens and schools or the work place, have become less important for longer lifetimes and shorter employment periods.

In 1929, Karl Mannheim postulated, as a special challenge for freely floating intellectuals, the development of a dynamic synthesis of diverse perspectives: beyond class and group barriers. This intellectual challenge becomes more demanding in multimedia dis/-information societies, namely to investigate (as journalists) well beyond traditional national perspectives, and to see and show synopses beyond current orientations and now living generations. "Listeners and viewers are not only consumers, thus market participants, but also citizens with a right to cultural participation, observance of the political events and participation in opinion shaping" (Habermas 2007, 2, my translation; Habermas 2006). Yet, Habermas' diagnosis clings to a focus on the immediate presence, a perspective, which must be complemented through an opening to collective memories as prerequisites for long-term goals (see section 3, below).

In contrast to such a challenge, most (screen-) media nowadays affirm simplified thought-templates like those of solitarily deciding politicians, who therefore are fully responsible for all problems and mistakes.

> *In the era of real-time global communication, it is possible that the speed and quantity of news is undermining its quality, accuracy and context. ... contemporary journalism, especially on TV, has to operate in a fiercely competitive, commercial and increasingly fragmented news market, which in order to attract consumers is adopting the form of 'infotainment'. ... In this age of ever shorter sound- and sight-bites, the question arises as to whether this 'turbo news' can allow a critical assessment and reflection of the content presented, or whether information overload erodes the potential for anything other than a superficial response.* (Thussu 2006, 219ff)

These diagnoses show that Habermas' focus on commercialisation requires additional inquiries into the dangers of acceleration and shortening, as well as of the hybridisation of information and entertainment.

> *One result of the proliferation of news outlets is a growing competition for audience and, crucially, advertising revenue, at a time when interest in news is generally declining. In the USA, audiences for network television peak time news bulletins declined substantially, from 90 per cent of the television audience in the 1960s to 30 per cent in 2000, partly as a result of many, especially younger viewers opting for online news sources.* (Thussu 2006: 221)

Though the latter also seem to be no more than

> *…a democratizing and even subversive communication tool, the commercialization of the Internet is perceived by some as betraying the initial promise of its potential to create a ‚global public sphere' and an alternative forum. ... By 2006 such terms as moblog – a blog maintained via a mobile phone, usually containing both text and pictures – and Vlog – video blog, used to display various forms of video images, also known as vog – had become popular.* (Thussu 2006, 227, 230)

These trends prove the increasing colonisation of the life-world, including its mobile areas. But, beyond Habermas' recent inquiries into the structural change of the public sphere, one must also attend to monitoring systems, which are fishing in numerous data streams via the newest information and communication technologies and keyword search engines, not only because of national security interests but also for economic advantages:

> *The USA already has an extensive international surveillance operation, Echelon, run by the US National Security Agency. Through a combination of spy satellites (such as Orion/Vortex for telecom surveillance and Trumpet to interpret cell phone calls) and sensitive listening stations, it eavesdrops on international electronic communication – phones, faxes, telexes, email and all radio signals, airline and maritime frequencies. Established in 1948 ... the Echelon system ... can give a competitive advantage to Anglo-Saxon corporations.* (Thussu 2006, 235; see www.nachrichtenaufklaerung.de for the number two of neglected news from 1998)

From a global perspective, the danger of a commercialisation of knowledge under western hegemony rises; the knowledge divide ex-communicates minorities within the rich countries, and the vast majority of most countries on earth. Thus the ex-communication functions of new communication technologies should be consistently scrutinised. Collective memories and amnesias belong hereto.

Collective (Audio-visual) Memories and Amnesias

Even if one only applies the birth and highest probable death dates of the currently living people in most societies, a biologically codetermined time horizon of about 200 years arises, from the beginning of the twentieth century, when our oldest fellow citizens were born, up to the beginning of the twenty-second century, when a still considerable percentage of people born in the beginning of the twenty-first century will die. The age of states or institutions usually requires an even longer time horizon. It is a fundamental deficiency of "today's" media that they are often geared to the short-term perspectives of agrarian societies, even though nuclear energy and genetic engineering disrupt the time horizons of communicated history.

The following examples will only sketch a few dimensions of this set of problems: the co-existence of various media-generations, with diverse collective textual, auditory, audio-visual, multi-media, and full-sensual experiences in partially conflicting mixtures. In an international comparative study of media memories of three consecutive generations, which was coordinated by Ingrid Volkmer (2006), the goal was to apprehend new dimensions of news media for symbolic integration. Based on focus-group-interviews in nine countries, this research resulted in the following classification: the radio-generation of the people born between 1924 and 1929, with their (in Mannheim's terms) formative years of 1935 to 1946; the TV-generation, born between 1954 and 1959, formed between 1965 and 1975, often through black-and-white television - and the internet-generation, born between 1979 and 1984 with the formative years of 1989 to 1999.

In Germany – according to Rusch and Volkmer (2006) – the radio-generation grew up in a closed media world, limited by the media technology and its use as a means for propaganda. Only a few areas of freedom in intimate, personal environ-

ments allowed for the individual questioning of collective, censored worldviews. The TV-generation, on the other hand, grew up in the phase thereafter, which was dominated (although grandparents and parents still passed down nationalistic matters) by new international music, Hollywood movies, and the first worldwide media events, like the murder of President Kennedy, or the taking of hostages during the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich. This middle generation is used to the old newspapers, radio broadcasts and cinema movies, its members watch a considerable amount of TV (mostly public broadcasters), and use the computer and Internet as well. The younger generation is not only shaped by a more individual usage of public and foremost private, commercial broadcasters, but also by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the (re-) unification of Germany. Internationally, this generational sequence can be labelled in terms of three major phases of specific preferences for certain media contents: (1) information, (2) music, shows, news, movies, and (3) entertainment and feature films.

Obvious shortcomings of journalistic information become clear in historic retrospect. For instance, Tunstall (2008, 64-68) outlined the following buried news and part-time amnesias of the 20th century:

> *1. The Congo, around 1900. Several million people died in the Belgian Congo ... 2. In the Soviet Union, Stalin's purges and the German invasion killed millions of civilians. ... 3. About six million Jews—and five million Poles, Roma, communists, and other 'undesirables'—were killed in the Holocaust. ... 4. The British and American targeted bombing of civilians in Germany and Japan ... probably killed between three and four million civilians. ... 5. In China during Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' campaign (1958-1960) probably between 15 and 30 million people died ... 6. In Guatemala some 200,000 civilians were killed by the army ... the late 1970s and late 1980s. ... 7. A significant fraction of the entire population of ... Ruanda was murdered ... in 1994. 8. Around 2000 the Congo experienced violence that produced over three million deaths. ... This was a classic example of a conflict too obscure, too complex, and too dangerous to allow reliable reporting.*

Tunstall (2008, 69) concluded: "Some further revelations may surface several decades after the violent events." It would be wrong to assume that in the twenty-first century such blatant negligence is no longer possible.

But how can the negligence of past developments and future horizons be overcome in the daily news show business? A first answer to this question is technical-economical: The increasingly fast and inexpensive access to archive inventories, which are already digitalised, indexed, classified and systematised, allows and advances the production of ever more types of reviews. Viewer or user surveys open up new selection and hierarchy criteria, which, however, mostly reproduce the text, sound, and video bites of the current bit-culture. Hence, novel modes of cooperation are necessary, namely between historians, archivists, and (specialised) journalists, who use the chances of computer simulations beyond the reproduction of easily available data. A second answer is that only if an enhancement of widely spread imagination competences goes along with the increasing audio-visualisation of the mass media, the new characteristics of network societies become, if not obvious, at least conceivable.

Castells (2000, 507-508) stressed that "image-making is power-making" and "flows of messages and images between networks constitute the basic thread of our social structure" and (1997, 359, here not in italics) argued in the second volume of his trilogy: "The new power lies in the codes of information and in the images of representation around which societies organise their institutions, and people build their lives, and decide their behaviour. The sites of power are people's minds." In "The Network Society: from Knowledge to Policy" Castells (2006, 14) offered the following diagnosis: "Mainstream media, and particularly television, still dominate the media space, although this is changing fast. Because the language of television is based on images, and the simplest political image is a person, political competition is built around leaders. … People think in metaphors, and built these metaphors with images."

In contrast to Castells, Arjun Appadurai (1996, 33) emphasised "five dimensions of global cultural flows," "ethno-, media-, techno-, finance-, and ideoscapes." Electronic media "decisively change the wider field of mass media and other traditional media … because they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and worlds"; they transform "preexisting worlds of communication and conduct."

> *The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes … the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.*

This convergence of Castells' and Appadurai's diagnoses of an increasing visualisation implies the necessity of visual competencies and imaginations. (In Habermas' theory of communicative action, this mutual enhancement may be interpreted as a special case of more general communicative competencies.) Van Dijk (2005, 15f) added that ICT-networks demand "trust, commitment and richness of information exchanged … trust is a vital condition in all networking both face-to-face and mediated … Commitment to the activities and ties of networks is perhaps even more important than commitment to the goals, activities, and colleagues in traditional organisations. Otherwise networks will easily fall apart." "The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order" (Appadurai 1996, 31; Luhmann 1997, Vol. 1: 305f.; Pfeiffer 2002). "The rise of the network society" therefore demands the following preconditions:

- "open structures,
- able to expand without limits,
- integrating new nodes as long as they are able to communicate within the network,
- namely as long as they share the same communication codes" (Castells 2000, 501).
- "The new power lies in the codes of information
- and in the images of representation around which societies organise their institutions,
- and people build their lives,
- and decide their behavior.
- The sites of power are people's minds" (Castells 1997, 359).

Or, in the more concrete terms of Barack Obama (2006, 306), emphasising especially the new threats: "If nation-states no longer have a monopoly on mass violence … if instead the fastest-growing threats are transnational – terrorist networks intent on repelling or disrupting the forces of globalisation, potential pandemic disease like avian flu, or catastrophic changes in the earth's climate – then how should our national security strategy adapt?"

A Public Sphere in Appearance Only – Towards Globalising Network Public Spheres

In contrast to Castells' concept of an open network society, integrated via the red thread of easily available meaningful images, a culture of self-portrayals in blogs and vlogs, on YouTube or myspace, solidifies – in considerable parts directed against the established, professional journalism. Thereby, new formats of self-portrayal develop as a supplement and substitute of discursive elements of segmented publics. Thus, not only the chance of new formats for interactive multimedia usage emerges, which Castells (2007) has interpreted as mass self-communication, but also an upheaval of media-information to the point of more individual, entertaining, and amateurish self-portrayals, which are far removed from professional analyses, comments, and background investigations on immanent threats. These amateur-publics (see Mayntz et al. 2008 regarding the important exception of scientific "knowledge production and knowledge transfer") are to be understood as attention markets and "appearance publics" (Habermas 1962/1989, 170-171):

> *Radio, film, and television by degrees reduce to a minimum the distance that a reader is forced to maintain toward the printed letter—a distance that required the privacy of the appropriation as much as it made possible the publicity of a rational-critical exchange about what had been read. With the arrival of the new media the form of communication as such has changed … Under the pressure of the 'Don't talk back!' the conduct of the public assumes a different form. In comparison with printed communications the program sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distances, place it under 'tutelage,' which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree. … The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only. By the same token the integrity of the private sphere which they promise to their consumers is also an illusion.*

The dissolution of the public sphere into private attention markets has long ago started for, as Habermas diagnosed already in 1962 (1962/1989, 171-172),

> *…the public sphere itself becomes the sphere for the publicizing of private biographies, so that the accidental fate of the so-called man in the street or that of systematically managed stars attain publicity, while publicly relevant developments and decisions are garbed in private dress and through personalization distorted to the point of unrecognizability … Even in the strata which once counted as 'cultured,' the formerly protective space of the family's inner sanctum has been pried open to such an extent that the private activities of reading novels and writing letters as preconditions for participation in the public sphere of the world of letters are suspended.*

And, what most probably also applies to interactive networking via, and in the modes of early twenty-first century ICTs, "the public is split apart into minorities of specialists who put their reason to use non publicly and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical. Consequently, it completely lacks the form of communication specific to a public" (Habermas 1962/1989, 175).

Already in the new and long introduction to the German pocket book edition of "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" from 1990, Habermas acknowledged positive chances of new types of information via television, especially, we may add, in educational programs or international news channels. And the World Wide Web has increasingly allowed ever more users to interactively use, including questioning, a new multitude of dis-/information offerings (Ludes 2008, 1993; see also Metykova 2008). Yet, in contrast to equal access to voicing contributions to public discourses, the financial investment in information acquisition and mediation play, furthermore, an essential role, because blogs and vlogs are – beyond the purely individual, self-portrayal part – often only a third and forth user of data, which were produced by big (transnational) corporations.

Habermas (2006, 416) recently differentiated two main types "among the actors who make their appearance on the virtual stage of an established public sphere," namely media professionals and politicians, as well as five more sub-types: lobbyists, advocates, experts, ethical entrepreneurs, and intellectuals. His argumentations suggest furthermore that the decline of critical publics demand "distrustful monitoring," because no democracy can afford a market failure in this sector (see section 1, above; see further Wendler 2008). The long-term socio-economic and media-technological upheavals, however, are so closely linked with the media experiences of new generations of journalists and media users, that out of these new experiences, new formats of discursive, multi-media co-orientation must also be developed professionally, which will establish long-term horizons beyond the currently dominating short-term interests. The social nets of a network society do not only catch or captivate – foremostly they have holes (or else they would not be nets), through which many fall. If within companies, the managers at the top are rewarded much higher than simple workers on the bottom, and they earn more in one day than their "subordinates" in a year, then the imagination of a net is deceptive: the holes of this net are of vastly different sizes, the distances between the knots are extremely asymmetrical, the concentration and firmness is hardly a knot in a way that these nets do not rip. Those who are especially cunning can make egoistic use of these features of a net. Thus, the dissolution of traditional publics into mainly visual and private attention markets, as a major component of the emerging network societies, should not fall victim to the egalitarian associations of this metaphor.

In the last volume of his three-volume study, Castells (1998, ch. II) argued that the rise of information societies went in close interconnection with an increase in social inequalities and the exclusion of vast groups of people. Increasing social exclusion has led to "perverse integration": criminal activities at a new level of capitalism. The deregulation of market forces has characterised the pace and mode of electronic mass media and digital information technologies. Children's work, sexual exploitation, and the emergence of a fourth world in the first world: people without housing, health insurance, employment, or culturally acceptable

pensions, have become more prevalent and visible. Ghettos of all kinds have developed in most parts of the industrial world. Movies and TV series, as well as Internet chat groups, however, often veil and obscure, rather than enlighten the more complicated economic, social, and cultural trajectories. High climax successes in extraordinary lives, often pinpoints of criminal careers, are attractive in mass media entertainment.

The deterioration of living conditions for hundreds of millions of people in contemporary societies thereby has fallen into collective amnesias. This trend renders it doubtful again to denigrate these developments as recent phases of the transformations of "the public sphere" or initial difficulties of still emerging global public spheres. Are they not more clearly to be understood as indicators of the dissolution of public spheres, replaced by, for example, the "marketisation" of the public communication sector (Murdock and Golding 1999), "a complex network of companies, products and audiences" (Chalaby 2005, 32), or the "growing political and economic pressure for the re-conceptualisation of broadcasting as a marketplace rather than as a cultural entity" (Papathanassopoulos 2005, 47)? There are even more accounts of the broader changes in technology and mobility, which show beyond "the public" (see e.g., Giulianotti and Robertson 2004; Goodwin and Spittle 2002; Kluver 2002; Lash and Urry 2002; Machin 2004; Rantanen 2005a, 2005b; Rojecki 2005; Urry 2000, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Zook 2005, 2007). If the concept of a public sphere keeps some obviousness, it must be transformed into globalising network public spheres.

In 2008, Castells elaborated his diagnosis on the "new public sphere: global civil society, communication networks, and global governance" and concluded that "public diplomacy, understood as networked communication and shared meaning, becomes a decisive tool for the attainment of a sustainable world order" (Castells 2008, 91). According to the arguments offered here, this diagnosis requires at least the following complementary dimensions: First, we must be more aware of the deceiving veils of appearance publics, immanent in the Janus head development of the transformation of public spheres for centuries. Second, generation specific media experiences and modes of evidence require long-term foci of attention, neglected especially in short-term commercial interest guided news businesses and shows. Third, social networks may be misinterpreted as equally knotted, but require more awareness of their excommunication functions (also emphasised in various publications by Castells). The recent concept by Castells, connecting global civil society, communication networks, and global governance, may suppose more instrumental dimensions of globalising communication in these terms – rather than taking into similar account the dark sides of globalising network communications. Therefore, I suggest, by this combination of Habermas and Castells, a more ambivalent and reality adequate concept of globalising network public spheres. Such a combination continues my early contributions to a dialogical sociology (1989, 2007) and is also in line with a recent article by Joshua Meyrowitz (2008).

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