

Glocal Nomad seminar – 7th October 2010

at Roskilde University

The ongoing emergence and convergence of the electronic mass media have been changing notions of the public sphere radically. While the key to understanding the Habermasian concept of the public sphere is in separating it from the medium in which it develops (Boeder, 2005: 7), media are crucial to the exercise of freedom of expression. Public opinion can only be formed if a public that engages in rational discussion is able to create and occupy a communicative space that is, ideally, free and independent of established interests and in addition open and accessible to all citizens.

In late modern, established democracies the plurality of media outlets have long provided the most significant public platform through which this civic right of freedom of expression has been exercised. In societies characterized by the absence and fragility of free and pluralistic media, the opposite potential of media, a tendency to reinforce the power of vested interests and exacerbate social inequalities by excluding critical or marginalized voices, is more dominant. Thus, the idea of media as a platform for democratic debate and political deliberation, as a vehicle for cultural expression and as a civic stage to promote transparency and public scrutiny (among other functions related to the ideal of the public sphere), is only poorly fulfilled. Under these conditions, independent journalism and other forms of mediated free expression, that can be seen as necessary while not sufficient means of strengthening good governance and promoting human development, might be silenced effectively.

Meanwhile, social forces opposing authoritarian regimes, from within and without, will (by default) strive to create and occupy 'alternative' channels of mediated communication which may contribute to an emerging public sphere. That is, they struggle to create a citizen media space for public debate which seeks to work around structural constraints (such as state censorship and -control, the coercive engineering of consent and the overt promotion of capitalist culture, etc.).

As Beth Noveck (2005) – the recently appointed the United States deputy chief technology officer for open government who leads President Obama's Open Government Initiative – has pointed out: "In groups people can accomplish what they cannot do alone. Now new visual and social technologies are making it possible for people to make decisions and solve complex problems collectively. These technologies are enabling groups not only to create community but also to wield power and create rules to govern their own affairs. Electronic democracy theorists have either focused on the individual and the state, disregarding the collaborative nature of public life, or they remain wedded to outdated and unrealistic conceptions of deliberation. ... technology will enable more effective forms of collective action. This is particularly so of the emerging tools for "collective visualization"

which will profoundly reshape the ability of people to make decisions, own and dispose of assets, organize, protest, deliberate, dissent and resolve disputes together. From this argument derives a second, normative claim. We should explore ways to structure the law to defer political and legal decision-making downward to decentralized group-based decision-making. . . . If we take seriously the potential impact of technology on collective action, we ought to think about what it means to give groups body as well as soul — to ‘incorporate’ them.”

Media development/support – as practiced by various non-governmental, state-, media industry-and multilateral donor-funded organizations – has long sought to nurture a media framework and journalistic practices which are oriented towards the overarching, normative ideal of a mass media constituted, free and open public sphere. Another strand of ‘encouragement’ has come with the (international) support of civil society organizations’ and social movements’ advocacy-oriented strategies of mediated communication. We might argue that civil society organizations’ and social movements’ are the collective embodiment of the politically informed and engaged citizen. Support of their objectives implies thus a civic, bottom-up encouragement of the formation of an open and pluralistic public sphere. Their common focus on issues of accountability, transparency, good governance, democratization etc. – that is a focus on the structural issues lying beyond questions of social service provision – makes them vital stakeholders in any healthy media environment, providing both support and scrutiny.

Ideally, CSOs and SMs will play a role in: monitoring media content and ownership; providing direct advocacy on freedom of expression, journalism safety and media policy and regulation; capacity building; and helping communities to access information and make their voices heard. They can engage with media professionals and policy makers to ensure that media meets the information needs of all sectors of society. Through their expertise and community base they can also inform reporting on issues such as HIV-AIDS prevention and ensure that the media avoids stereotyping or excluding the voices of marginalized groups. Ideally, the support and scrutiny that they give in relation to the media (as institutions), should ideally also go the other way. That is, the thematic focus of independent journalism should also include informed journalistic investigations into the agency of CSOs and SMs.

New technologies increasingly play a central role in the mediation of social networks. Any socially grounded theory of the public sphere will have to take into account these social network structures and the communications systems that bind them together. Not just the structure of the mass media, the entire society is subject to change as new network structures come into place. The technological infrastructure of communication networks is influencing the social structure of society; its development is closely related to the development of social structures in a process of interchange and mutual dependence. The conventional notion of a single, unified public sphere is likely to disappear in favor of a more segmented, pluralist model: Something like a "complex mosaic of differently sized overlapping and interconnected public spheres" (Keane, 1995). What binds people in this contemporary public sphere is a "diversified and shifting complex of overlapping similarities and differences." The Internet itself forms the perfect example of this new structure. (Boeder 2005: 10).

New technologies (as employed by mass and network media) are creating a new public sphere, a new realm of cyberdemocracy, and are thus challenging public intellectuals to gain technoliteracy and to make use of the new technologies for promoting progressive causes and social transformation: If there is a public sphere on the Internet, who populates it and how? What kinds of beings exchange information in this public sphere? What kind of community can there be in this space? What kind of disembodied politics are inscribed so evanescently in cyberspace? What constitutes communities in cyberspace and cyberdemocracy?

The outlined transformation has far-reaching implications for the way we may practice and understand the encouragement of a multi-layered, democratic public sphere. In our upcoming *Glocal Nomad* seminar we will focus on the question how both strands of strategic communicative intervention may go hand in hand. What are the particular challenges, constraints and strengths of an ‘orthodox’ media development approach, on the one hand, and support for the emergence, proliferation and sustainability of civil society-centered approach to –e-advocacy and digital empowerment, on the other hand? How can both approaches complement each other and what are the affordances of the specific media and communication technologies that they employ? Can we delineate a strategy of multi-faceted commitment (UNESCO, 2008: *Media Development Indicators Report*) that nurtures a media framework and set of communicative practices which contributes to the unifying goal of a democratic public sphere?