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# DEFENDING DEMOCRACY AGAINST POPULIST NEO-FASCIST ATTACKS: THE ROLE AND PROBLEMS OF PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY

**Bart Cammaerts**

*In the wake of the recent attacks on democracy by a re-invigorated populist neo-fascism there is a pressing need to articulate a middle ground position in debates between the public sphere paradigm and its critiques. This requires an engagement with tensions between consensus and conflict, rationality and emotion, and the system and the lifeworld. Furthermore, there is also a need to scrutinize the role of hybrid media system in promoting populist neo-fascist discourses and actors, but also assert its normative task to combat it. Whereas conflict and power cannot be eradicated from the political, conflict is also a destructive force which requires a set of agreed upon ethico-political principles in order for a radical democracy to function. It is also argued that emotions need to be part of the democratic fight-back, but it is also suggested that a critical realist disposition combining epistemic relativism with judgmental rationality will be crucial to counter the relativism on steroids practiced by neo-fascist actors. Finally, the hybrid media system needs to be reconnected with the lifeworld, citizen interests and democratic values through a new regulatory framework, and the tradition of public journalism could provide inspiration for a democratic fightback from within the media system.*

**KEYWORDS** public sphere; agonism; exclusion; rationality; emotions; neo-fascism

> "Would it not be rather terrible if we were still training young kids […] for wars that are no longer possible, fighting enemies long gone, conquering territories that no longer exist, leaving them ill-equipped in the face of threats we had not anticipated, for which we are so thoroughly unprepared?"
>
> (Latour 2004, 225)

In this era of interregnum, when – as Antonio Gramsci explained – the old is dying but the new has not been born yet, we are not only witnessing a fundamental crisis of the liberal representative democratic model but also the resurgence of an invigorated and insidious populist neo-fascism. Instead of deploying more sanitised denominations such as rightwing populism, radical/extreme right, new right or indeed alt-right, I believe it is important to be crystal clear about what we are dealing with here in ideological terms and that is a populist fascism intent on subverting democracy and undermining

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democratic values. In this regard, I follow Jason Stanley's (2018) analysis which highlights attributes such as anti-enlightenment, the celebration of inequality and nativism, a deep-seated nostalgia and well-developed victimhood, as well as anti-democratic authoritarianism and the rejection of the separation of powers. In addition to this, a broken and toxic hybrid media system is actively contributing to this crisis of liberal democracy, amongst others by amplifying the appeal of populist neo-fascist tropes and agendas (Forchtner, Krzyżanowski, and Wodak 2013; López 2014; Ouellette and Banet-Weiser 2018).

The question I believe is important to pose for critical scholarship in this increasingly acute moment of democratic crisis is whether it is possible – or indeed imperative – to bury the hatchet and articulate a middle ground position between public sphere theory and its post-structural as well as post-colonial critiques? In other words, can we get to a point in paradigmatic terms whereby we can account for and value the conflictual nature of the political as well as the constitutive role of emotions but at the same time also cherish and postulate ways of establishing veracity and factuality, as well as prescribe a minimum rational common civic and democratic ground on which these conflicts, contestations and struggles can and should be waged within the realm of a radical democracy?

First, some of the more fundamental critiques fielded against public sphere theory will be addressed, especially relating to rationality and emotions, conflict and consensus, inclusion and exclusion. Subsequently, an attempt will be made to articulate a middle-ground position which rescues parts of the public sphere paradigm in defence of radical democracy, but also values conflict and contestation as well as affect and emotions in politics. Finally, the normative consequences of this for our "hybrid" media and communication system will be outlined further.

## The Public Sphere Paradigm and Its Critiques

The public sphere must be one of the most heavily debated, critiqued, contested and used concepts in social theory. This makes it particularly challenging to add anything new or original to that debate, but given this broad variety of interpretations and considerations it is nevertheless essential to first and foremost briefly outline what is understood here as the *public sphere paradigm* at the intersection of media, communication and democracy.

### *The Public Sphere Paradigm*

Habermas considered the bourgeois public sphere to be a productive open space in which particularistic interests and collective interests or "the common good" could be mediated in an equitable and democratic way. To achieve this, private interests needed to be overcome to the benefit of a societal consensus reached through the uncoerced confrontation of rational arguments or public deliberation (Habermas 1989, 33). Democratic deliberation within the public sphere requires an *ideal speech situation* which stipulates that "structural power, ideology and cultural capital generally be set aside so the force of the better argument alone be heard" (How 2003, 165). When confronted with a better argument, citizens must be willing to change their mind, which avoids polarisation and leads to the forging of a societal consensus through rational communicative action. In addition to generating public opinion and societal consensus through dialogue and

providing moral validity and political legitimacy to democratic decisions, the public sphere was also seen to be an empowering space, expanding democratic participation and providing citizens the means and tools to influence decisions that affect them (Fraser 2005, 1).

When it comes to the role of the media in the public sphere, it is important to consider that the public sphere is not reducible to "the media." Communication and oral dialogue were deemed to be just as, if not more, important. At the same time, political, cultural as well as everyday life has increasingly become mediated through (social) media and what is termed a *hybrid media system* (Chadwick 2013). In addition to this, "the media", as in journalists and media organisations, remain privileged actors within the public sphere as they are supposed to be the guardians of democracy and fulfil monitorial and facilitative roles within the public sphere (Christians et al. 2009). The former aligns with the liberal watchdog role positioning the media as independent from state and market forces and controlling these powers that be, whereas the latter finds its antecedents in pluralism and is concerned with creating a level playing field for a variety of views and voices to be heard and aired. The facilitative role also aligns with social responsibility theories advocating for fair representations and the redressing of asymmetries.

In Habermas' account, this *ideal* bourgeois public sphere was gradually and structurally transformed into a space of mass consumption and infotainment governed not by collective interests and a quest for the common good, but rather by the private interests of a select political and above all economic elite. This refeudalisation of the public sphere by state and market power led to public opinion no longer being formed through processes of deliberation but rather shaped and controlled by these same elites producing a media system that was driven by advertising and ruled by a PR-logic which encroached political and public life further and further. As a result, Habermas (1989, 170) argued, we were left with "a public sphere in appearance only" and democratic citizens were reduced to mere spectators.

At the heart of public sphere theory, Habermas (1992, 444) situated a dichotomy between the lifeworld and the system. The lifeworld is where opinion formation takes place and it is deemed to be organised by rational communicative action, whereas the system – market and state – is organised respectively by economic interests and power. Habermas argues that whereas the market and state systems initially evolved out of the lifeworld, contemporary societies are characterised by a decoupling of the system from the lifeworld, whereby the system "now exists externally to it, feeding back into it from the outside" (How 2003, 129). This encroachment of the lifeworld by the system through instrumental and strategic rationality (rather than communicative/deliberative rationality) gave rise to a whole range of pathologies, thwarting the "emancipatory potential of the lifeworld" (How 2003).

Over the years, a whole range of critiques were fielded against this ideal-type public sphere paradigm. Without aiming to be exhaustive, I will focus here on the more fundamental challenges to the public sphere paradigm. Fundamental critiques of the public sphere paradigm go beyond arguing that the normative ideals of the public sphere are unrealistic, but challenge the normative ideals themselves and question some or indeed all of the core premises of public sphere theory. In the context of the populist neo-fascist challenge to democracy, three core critiques are highly relevant: (1) the role of conflict and linked to this the ontological impossibility of a rational consensus; (2) the exclusion of emotions and passions from the public sphere; and (3) the too strict dichotomy between lifeworld and system. Let me address each in turn.

### *The Consensus and Conflict Dichotomy*

The first fundamental critique discussed here relates to the public sphere paradigm's over-emphasis on consensus building, on a solutions-oriented politics and the forging of societal harmony. Because of this strong impetus to reach a consensus, i.e. an equilibrium, the public sphere paradigm aligns with consensus theory (Parsons 1939). This has unsurprisingly been forcefully critiqued by Marxist and post-Marxist proponents of more conflict-driven and dissensus theories. First and foremost, from a conflict model, a "true" consensus is an ontological impossibility given that a consensus always excludes certain delegitimated positions and viewpoints. As such, the insistence itself that "unity" or consensus has to be "either a starting point or goal of democratic discussion […] may also have exclusionary consequences," as argued by Young (1996, 122). As a result of this, "the very possibility of a nonexclusive public sphere of rational argument where a non-coercive consensus can be reached" is ontologically rejected (Mouffe 1996, 255).

Post-structuralist critiques emphasising the conflictual nature of the political, go further than that though; "the constructive role of contentious democratic engagement" is celebrated and considered to be an essential attribute of democracy and of social change, whereas the quest "to uncover latent sources of unity and commonality" is considered "as a subtly hegemonic undertaking which seeks the taming of democratic energies rather than the re-vitalization of democracy" (Glover 2012, 87–88). As Chantal Mouffe (1996, 255) explains, "[i]n a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive." While the normative goal of reaching an all-encompassing societal consensus is rejected, an alternative normative position is defended whereby democratic processes are geared towards reaching compromises or temporary ceasefires in ongoing conflicts, but these conflicts never reach full – or ultimate – closure (Mouffe 1999, 755). The role of radical democracy is therefore not to erase conflict and thereby also power, but it is to turn *antagonisms* into *agonisms* and political *enemies* into legitimate political *adversaries*.

### *The Rationality and Emotions Dichotomy*

Besides the goal of reaching a consensus, the way this consensus is to be reached within the public sphere paradigm privileges rational argumentation and factual validation over emotional appeals and passionate rhetorics. Many have argued that this leads to an internal contradiction. Whereas the public sphere is supposed to be open, inclusive, a level playing field, untainted by power, by only considering rational speech as legitimate speech a vast range of political speech and actors are effectively excluded from the public sphere. This may very well be desirable in some cases, as we are witnessing acutely today, but at the same time such exclusions also have disproportional effects. Feminist scholars, such as Iris Marion Young (1996, 124), observed that.

> The speech culture of women and racial minorities […] tends to be more excited and embodied, more valuing the expression of emotion, the use of figurative language, modulation in tone of voice, and wide gesture.

She also noted that this privileging of communicative rationality to the detriment of affective speech wrongly assumes a duality between mind and body and constructs a false

equivalence between calm, dispassion and objectivity, a critique that is also shared by post-colonial scholars (Martín-Barbero 1993).

Besides Feminist critiques regarding the strong emphasis on rationality, post-structuralist accounts of discursive power also chipped away at some of the foundations of Modernist critical theory by challenging the exceptionalism and righteousness of rationality itself. Post-structuralist as well as post-colonial critiques highlighted in minute detail how reason and Enlightenment ideals also served as instruments of oppression and repression. They contended that that which is considered to be rational and (universally) true does not exist beyond and outside of power, bias and discourse. In an interview, Michel Foucault (1988, 28–29) explained that "reason is self-created." For Foucault, "rationality, like subjectivity, is a product of particular historical power/knowledge relations" (Phillips 1996, 243), and as such the outcome of struggle and conflict.

Furthermore, emotions are not always nor universally negative or problematic in democratic terms. As John Durham Peters (1999, 110) put it, "[p]ublic participation flourishes when people are moved." Likewise, social movement scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that reason and rationality on their own are not sufficient to achieve meaningful political action and participation (Jasper 2018). From this perspective, emotions and passions also need to be part of the solution and be mobilised in defence of democracy.

### *The Lifeworld and System Dichotomy*

The final paradigmatic critique addressed here relates to the lifeworld/system dichotomy, which is also one of the central features of the public sphere paradigm. This relationship is deemed by critics to be approached in an overly Manichean manner by Habermas (Honneth 1993; Layder 1997). This stark division, which to a large extent removes the system from democratic action and processes of social change, is not necessarily present at an empirical level, but it is constructed at a normative level. This creates theoretical problems if we aim to position media and communication within radical democracy and communicative action. In *Further Reflections on the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1992, 452) makes a distinction between "the communicative generation of legitimate power on the one hand" and "the manipulative deployment of media power to procure mass loyalty, consumer demand, and 'compliance' with systemic imperatives on the other." This positions mainstream (and today also social media) squarely within the system as instrumental manipulators in the service of market and state interests, and decoupled from the lifeworld; it also brackets power in its one-dimensional understanding, namely dominant power (Lukes 2005). As a result of this, Douglas Kellner (2014, 32) laments that the media "are excluded from the possibility of contributing to the politics of a broader societal democratization" which leaves little room for a progressive, democratic media and the articulation of a democratic media policy.

The system is inextricably intertwined with media organisations and communication infrastructures and platforms, as the political economy tradition has consistently shown, but the media as in journalists, media organisations, and the tools, spaces for public and private communication, need to be – at the very least in a normative way – part of and implicated in societal democratisation and its defence and not conceptually separated from the lifeworld as an unavoidably malevolent actor captured by and in the service of state and market power.

## Democratising Democracy and Fighting Populist Neo-Fascism: Articulating the Need for a Middle-ground Position

As mentioned in the introduction, democratic values, cultures and institutions are facing an increasingly existential crisis in recent decades. This crisis has resulted in but is also fuelled and exacerbated by a populist neo-fascist politics which is not only gaining electoral strength in many countries, but also coming into power, and in doing so eroding core democratic principles and fundamental human and civil rights. This phenomenon is consistent across the world and occurs in established democracies such as Italy and the US, in relatively new democratic regimes such as Poland and Hungary, but also in a whole range of democratic countries in the Global South, such as India and Brazil (Mudde 2019).

Liberal representative democracy is not only in a crisis because populist neo-fascist actors undermine it or because the hybrid media system is amplifying them. The electoral success of anti-democratic parties and the salience of their poisonous discourses of hate arguably also has a demand-side and is a symptom of a deeper and more fundamental crisis pertaining to contradictions inherent to liberal democracy itself; how it is practiced, how it generates (or fails to generate) legitimacy, how it relates to capitalism and regimes of inequality and how it adjudicates (or not) the inherent conflicts within *the political* in a seemingly fair, equitable and democratic manner (Brown 2019; Muis and Immerzeel 2017).

The public sphere paradigm but also its post-structuralist critiques both offer productive pathways and ideas to *democratise democracy*. They both advocate the need of a strong civic and vibrant democratic culture and vigorous public debate (Glover 2012). They are also both deeply concerned with legitimate decision-making and foreground the importance of strong democratic institutions. As discussed above, where they differ, broadly speaking, is on their approach to the relationship between conflict and consensus, as well as their appreciations of rationality and emotions in the political, but they are both implicated in what Trenz (2023, 112) calls public sphere resilience and democratic rejuvenation.

### *Ethico-Political Principles and the Destructive Force of Conflict*

When it comes to conflict, we are living in an era that is perceived to be highly adversarial. This gets expressed through the rise of concepts such as *political polarisation,* which some argue is the result of increases in inequality, ontological insecurity, fragmentation, mediated homophily and the deterioration of public discourse (Borbáth, Hutter, and Leininger 2023). According to the post-structuralist agonistic model, however, polarisation, especially if it results in making the stakes more visible and competing interests more explicit, is precisely what is needed to reinvigorate democracy through radical pluralism (Mouffe 2013). The problem we are faced with today, however, is that radical polarisation and the conflicts it engenders are threatening the very foundations of democracy itself as well as the civic and human rights that are inherent to it. A whole range of slick populist neo-fascist politicians across the world present a deeply racist and anti-democratic ideology in a very civilised and rational manner and they market themselves as critical democrats saying what "the people are thinking," cherry-picking some liberal rights such as freedom of speech to advocate for the destruction and denial of others (Cammaerts 2020).

When it comes to countering the increasingly successful efforts by populist neo-fascists to undermine the democratic foundations, the public sphere paradigm does offer a clear ethico-political justification to set boundaries and exclusions from the democratic public sphere in order to protect civic and human rights. It might be useful in this regard to recall that even from a rightwing conservative position, Karl Popper (1965, 265) spoke of a *paradox of intolerance,* in that "[u]nlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance." While an adversarial and agonistic democracy might be healthy and indeed necessary in a strong and vibrant democracy, it also warrants a minimum common ground; a minimum degree of consensus or unity to function and above all to continue to function.

In this regard, Mouffe (2005, 120), who reasons from a dissociative agonistic pluralism perspective, also contends that "[a] democracy cannot treat those who put its basic institutions into question as legitimate adversaries." In other words, the political relationship between those adhering to a basic set of ethico-political democratic principles and those who do not, such as (neo-)fascists, will always be an antagonistic[1] rather than an agonistic one. Whereas a "conflictual consensus" exists between agonistic adversaries – i.e. "they agree about the ethico-political principles which organise their political association but disagree about the interpretation of these principles" (Mouffe 2013, 139), in antagonistic relationships a joint agreement on a set of basic ethico-political principles is lacking. To remain within the vocabulary of the Mouffian agonistic model, a *chain of equivalence* or a "thin notion of commonality" (Glover 2012, 91) is thus needed amongst democrats, creating a fundamental ethical boundary – or what Jan-Werner Müller (2021) calls a "hard border" – between democratic and anti-democratic views, practices and actors.

The agonistic model thus also provides ethico-political justification for exclusions and boundaries, but the justified exclusions are less extensive and more contingent than within the public sphere paradigm. The question that begs being addressed in this regard, however, is whether *exclusion* is necessarily the right way out of this democratic conundrum. The increasing appropriation of populist neo-fascist discourse and style by the mainstream right and recent counter-discursive strategies relating to "cancel culture" seem to suggest that it might not be (Cammaerts 2022). When combatting extreme right populism, Timo Korstenbroek (2022, 71) argues, "one must fight fire with water, i.e. combat ideas of exclusion with theories stressing inclusion." He does not argue for an inclusion of populist neo-fascist discourses into the public debate in an uncritical manner, but excluding them leaves these ideas go uncontested which might in turn contribute to their normalisation. Instead, he imagines a space.

> in which right-wing populist sentiments are listened to, yet simultaneously confronted regularly with the – often personal – stories and narratives of those (non-native) others they oppose. Through this, the aim is to find pathways beyond empathy walls and reach upon minimal common grounds with others across these walls. (Korstenbroek, 2022, 83)

Korstenbroek (2022) proposes to envisage an *emphatic public sphere* which includes and engages with citizens that align with and vote for these actors and parties as well as bring these citizens' concerns into the public conversation. While this appeasement strategy disassociating populist neo-fascist parties and politicians from those that vote for them has some merit, it does run the risk of ending up reinforcing and sedimenting neo-fascist ideas, policies, values and practices further.

### *The Weaponisation of Relativism and Critical Realism*

The other main contention between the public sphere paradigm and its post-structuralist and post-colonial critiques pertains to the role of emotions and conversely to the problematic nature of rationality. In this regard, populist neo-fascist actors have weaponised the post-structuralist and above all post-modern critiques against democracy itself to the extent that some scholars have started to term contemporary rightwing politics "post-modern conservatism" (McManus 2019). A *relativism on steroids* has given rise to what some have denoted as post-truth politics, turning compulsive lying and bullshitting into the dominant form of political communication in Western democracies (Ball 2017; Durnová 2019). This is well illustrated by US extreme-right political commentator Andrew Breitbart's (2011, np) postulate of subverting critical theory "by presenting unvarnished truth after unvarnished truth until the light dawns on everyone just how right we are." Trumps' councillor Kellyann Conway calling factual inaccuracies and lies simply "alternative facts" should also be seen in this light. Along the same lines, post-colonial critiques against (Western) universalism have also been taken to an extreme by populist neo-fascists in the Global South to justify human rights abuses and ethno-religious violence, as is the case in India with Modi's Hindutva fascism (Banaji 2018). In this regard, Silke Van Dyk (2022, 46), observes that:

> the theoretical toolkit and the scholarly practice required to deal with problematic instances of deconstruction and denaturalization are absent – a lacuna in the critical programme with dire consequences under current political conditions.

All this also speaks to Bruno Latour's vivid warning to critical scholars in his Stanford presidential lecture entitled *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?*. After observing right-wing authoritarian politics fully embracing relativism and post-structuralist critiques, Latour (2004, 232) acknowledged that it was a mistake.

> to believe that there was no efficient way to criticize matters of fact except by moving away from them and directing one's attention toward the conditions that made them possible.

He suggested adding more reality to matters of fact and paying more attention to matters of concern whose task it would be not to deconstruct, to debunk or to critique, but to "protect and care" (Latour 2004), which also speaks to Kavada's article in this issue.

Another source of inspiration could be critical realism which precisely aims to negotiate a middle ground position between naturalism/positivism and anti-naturalism/hermeneutics (Archer et al. 1998). Critical realism constitutes a potentially useful theoretical bridge to salvage truth and facticity whilst still recognising its contingency through discourse and power, an argument also put forward by Nick Couldry (2008, 172–173) and Van Dyk (2022, 47). How to go about this in practical terms though, is less obvious. It could be productive in this regard to consider Roy Bhaskar's (1998) distinction between *epistemic relativism* and *judgmental relativism*. Whereas the former "asserts that all beliefs are socially produced, so that all knowledge is transient, and neither truth-values nor criteria of rationality exist outside historical time," the latter posits that "all beliefs (statements) are equally valid, in the sense that there can be no (rational) grounds for preferring one to another" (1998, 236). What we are witnessing in populist neo-fascist discourse today is a strategic collapsing of epistemic and judgmental relativism.

To break this bond, a range of actors and practices will need to work in unison with a view of reasserting judgmental rationalism without denying epistemic relativism. In this regard, an ethical media in the service of civic and democratic rights and values can and should play a central role. However, all responsibility for this should not be placed at the doorstep of the media and journalism. As Lippmann (quoted in Peters 1999, 111) once asserted, we cannot expect the media to "make up for all that was not foreseen in the theory of democracy." Education and especially more advanced media literacy skills are also crucial in this regard, but above all democratic political elites themselves should abide again by the principles of judgmental – and thus evidence-based – rationality rather than give in to the logic of spin and judgmental relativism, as amongst others the *New Labour* project and subsequent governments in the UK did (Garland 2018). Having said this, in the next section the focus will mainly be on the role of the hybrid media system.

## The Role of the Hybrid Media System in the Fight for Democracy

It is increasingly becoming clear that media and communication organisations, infrastructures, as well as increasingly algorithms and AI tools, are playing an active and increasingly detrimental role when it comes to the dissemination, amplification and ultimately normalisation of populist neo-fascism (Trenz 2023, 154–155). To reverse this and implicate the hybrid media system in defence of democracy, a new regulatory framework is urgently needed, informed by public and democratic rather than private and commercial interest. In view of the discussion above with regards to finding a common ground between the public sphere paradigm and its critiques, the question becomes which normative ideals need to be asserted through this framework in defence of communicative radical democracy? First, the question of inclusion/exclusion returns very strongly in a mediated context. Second, the primacy of rationality can be found in the practice of fact-checking, but emotions, the affective and the empathic also play a central role in a mediated context, in both constructive and harmful ways. Finally, concentrated private ownership of the media and broader internet infrastructures are increasingly in contention with public interests, democratic goals and the very idea of an independent/free media system.

### *Inclusion vs. Exclusion of Populist Neo-Fascist Voices and Discourses*

More than two decades ago and referring to the North-Belgian context, we called for a so-called *Cordon Médiatique* around the neo-fascist party (Carpentier and Cammaerts 2000). Just as the democratic parties had signed a formal pledge – *Le Cordon Sanitaire* – to exclude the North-Belgian neo-fascist party Vlaams Blok/Belang[2] [Flemish Bloc/Interest] from power, we advocated a "hard border" when it came to the media's treatment of blatantly anti-democratic parties. In that polemic piece, we formulated four action points: (1) highlight the societal problems and conflicts that prompt citizens to vote for neo-fascist parties, as well as various democratic solutions to these problems, which aligns somewhat with Korstenbroek's emphatic public sphere; (2) monitor the representation and misrepresentation of these parties in the mainstream media; (3) investigate these parties and politicians critically, but do not provide them a platform to relentlessly disseminate their discourse of hate; and (4) protect journalists and democratic media organisations that abide by these principles.

While these action points were not heeded, on the contrary, more than 20 years later the very idea of exclusion seems obsolete as it has become simply impossible – and maybe even undesirable – to legally (or otherwise) stop neo-fascist discourses from circulating unfettered through the hybrid media system. In a way democratic politicians and media are caught in a Catch22, damned if you do engage and contest, damned if you do not. On the one hand, the politics of provocation and outrage practiced by populist neo-fascist politicians, as well as the high propensity of disinformation distributed by them through a variety of channels, makes it dangerous to ignore and to not engage and contest it, but this in turn also contributes to legitimating and normalising their provocations and racist hate speech (Cammaerts 2020).

Exclusions within the realm of communicative democracy do exist, however. Freedom of speech and of the press is nowhere absolute, not even in the U.S. which operates under the first amendment doctrine but also has a strong anti-defamation culture (Schauer 1995). Most democratic countries also have laws restricting speech which incites hatred and promotes sexual, ethnic and racial discrimination, but these are arguably rather scantly applied, especially when it comes to (social) media's complicity in amplifying and fanning transgressive hate speech (Matamoros-Fernández and Farkas 2021). Furthermore, it is also abundantly clear that populist neo-fascists are weaponising the right to free speech (Titley 2020).

At the same time many liberal media organisations and journalists do often push back against populist neo-fascists and their discourses, which is precisely why they get denoted as "enemies of the people" by them (Kenny 2020). Populist neo-fascists political actors invariably reject the legitimacy of critical intermediaries who they claim distort the direct and authentic relationship between themselves and "the people." As a result of this, the liberal push-back often has the opposite effect because it feeds the victimhood which populist neo-fascist actors cultivate (Stanley 2018), and it is also strategically used to sediment the constructed dichotomy further between "the people" and the so-called out-of-touch "media elites" (Mudde 2019).

It is not only legacy media that struggle with the question of where to draw the line when it comes to transgressive speech, so do social media. All social media platforms have to a larger or lesser extent a moderation policy and a set of terms and conditions its users have to sign up to. The degree and the enthusiasm with which these policies are enforced varies between platforms, but it remains the case that mainly US-based corporate actors decide what can be said and shared and what not on social media platforms in large parts of the world. In non-democratic contexts that could be seen as a very good thing, in other contexts less so (Wilson and Land 2021). Besides removals, algorithms can also *shadowban* or reduce access to certain content as a form of harm reduction by not giving it prominence in searches and lists of trending topics/posts, a strategy that many platforms already employ (Gillespie 2018).

This *access power* comes with a huge degree of social responsibility and arguably requires more public scrutiny, especially as an even smaller number of players control these vital platforms for public life than is the case with legacy media. Resistance against the access power of platforms is also rife; former U.S. president Donald Trump even set-up his own platform *Truth Social*, but his platform also had to agree to Google's (minimal) content moderation policies to be allowed on their app store (Sankaran 2022).

Elsewhere we argued that this debate regarding inclusion/exclusion, the limits of freedom of speech, what is possible or not to say and communicate online, and the

issue of regulating social media should in itself be the object of an agonistic democratic debate and be part and parcel of the agreed-upon ethico-political democratic principles discussed above (Cammaerts and Mansell 2020). This would require more formalised – dare I suggest agonistic as well as deliberative – democratic debates *in* the public sphere and in democratic institutions *about* the public sphere and about the democratic roles and responsibilities of both legacy and social media, as well as the limits of freedom of speech.

### *Fact-Checking and Affective Public Spheres*

The tension between rationality and the emotive is also highly relevant in the context of the hybrid media system and its role in combatting but also distributing, promoting and profiting off the populist neo-fascist discourse and its propagandistic disinformation, lies and conspiracy theories. One counter-tactic against this deployed by the liberal mainstream media has been the practice of fact-checking; a very rational response in line with the public sphere paradigm. Fact-checking by liberal mainstream media as an antidote against this proliferation of disinformation and conspiracy theories often fails, however, because those targeted by and eager to believe the propagandistic lies and conspiracy theories are not reading/watching liberal media that fact-check nor are they that concerned with or invested in rational truth to begin with (Nieminen and Rapeli 2019). This does not mean, however, that we should give up on fact-checking as a counter-tactic, but clearly alternative strategies need to be developed alongside it.

This will arguably require an engagement with and recognition of the role of emotions, both in a positive sense and a negative sense. Recent research has shown that "misinformation and extreme partisan information […] are more stimulating than accurate information and non-extreme partisan information and create negative emotions and polarise people" (Weismueller et al. 2023, 25). As also mentioned earlier, both legacy and social media are central to the increasing dramatisation of political life as well as the distribution of falsehoods, thereby undermining the democratic fabric of societies.

When it comes to legacy media adhering to a *mass media logic*, the coverage of mediated populism tends to be characterised either by a journalism of "aghastment" (Frank 2017) in the case of liberal media or a journalism of genuflection, as exhibited by tabloid media and partisan rightwing broadcasters á la Fox"News"[3] and "News"max. Whether critical, or not, in the end all media profit from increased polarisation, drama and spectacles. As a result of this, Des Freedman (2018, 606) concludes that "the coverage of populist leaders and narratives is not simply profitable but the logical outcome of media markets in liberal democracies that are wedded to ratings and controversy." We do need to consider, however, the Catch22 position media finds itself in when covering populist neo-fascist politicians and their discourses of hate, as mentioned above.

Internet infrastructures and social media are arguably even more implicated in the rise of populist neo-fascism (Alvares and Dahlgren 2016). This is because a *network media logic* fits anti-democratic actors extremely well; given that it is engagement-driven, enables targeted individualisation and disintermediation, and produces homophilic communities. This leads Gianpietro Mazzoleni and Roberta Bracciale (2018, 3) to assert that social media "contribute to dramatising populist communication because they are platforms suited to producing emotional, controversial, even violent contents typical of much populist activism."

Emotions are, however, not necessarily always negative. Evidence suggests that while affective polarisation and negative emotions do indeed reduce the potential for deliberation and considering the viewpoints of the "other" side (Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley 2021), it also positively affects voter turnout and engagement with politics, and this "polarisation effect appears to be strongest for those less interested in politics" (Borbáth, Hutter, and Leininger 2023, 644). The question that emerges here, however, is to which extent emotions can also be deployed productively in defence of democratic values and to strengthen rather than weaken civic democratic cultures? Idea's such as Zizi Papacharissi's (2015) *affective publics* or Korstenbroek's (2022) *emphatic public sphere* point in that direction, but also social movement literature can be instructive in this regard (Jasper 2018).

As such and in line with the middle ground position defended here, emotions and rationality should not be approached as binary opposites, but we should focus on how affects and emotions can co-exist with evidence-based factuality and rationality. As Durnová (2019, 63) points out,

> [w]e can still admit that things can be context-dependent, and especially emotionally loaded, without playing into the populist endorsements of inaccuracies and the marginalization of science.

Furthermore, emotions and passions are not necessarily rejected outrightly by the public sphere paradigm, as is also argued convincingly by Bakardjieva in this issue. There is, however, an important pre-requisite for this which I think is relevant in the context of populist neo-fascism. Namely, emotions and passions are only productive democratically in so far as they lead "to an opening of discursive space and an expansion of the publicly available argument repertoire" (Wessler 2018, 147). This is why Harmut Wessler rejects the U.S. "alt-right"-movement as a subaltern counter-public given that they aim to reduce the discursive space and protect "structures of domination and exclusion" (Wessler 2018, 151). In other words, the moral foundations and legitimacy of the claims for which emotions are mobilised need to matter.

### *Reconnecting the Hybrid Media System to the Lifeworld?*

The elephant in the room when it comes to the hybrid media system's role in defending democracy and democratic values is the relationship between the hybrid media system and capitalist structures and logics. One of the main weaknesses of the post-structuralist critiques – but to a lesser extent also of the public sphere paradigm – is their too exclusive focus on discursive power – or on the normative possibility of pure communicative action – to the detriment of a critical analysis of the material structures which enable and disable communication and the commercial and corporate interests owning and controlling these structures. This brings the political economy of media and communication back into the conversation (cf. Pickard 2015; Freedman 2018). A concern with and focus on concentration of ownership and material capitalist interests also harks back to the Marxist antecedents of both the public sphere paradigm and its critiques but has arguably been displaced by respective efforts to de-essentialise political struggles as well as emancipate the cultural from economic/material determinism.

Pedro Rey-Araújo (2020, 193) observes in this regard that much of the post-Marxist discourse theory literature is "oblivious to the relevance of capitalism in both constraining

social action and conditioning the social structure's diachronic evolution." It is also negligent of capitalism's propensity of reducing the possibility of a pluralistic, democratic and independent media and communication space. In line with ideas of new materialism and in the context of algorithmic power, Taina Bucher (2018, 67) argues that there is an urgent need in critical theory to be more sensitive to the "material dimensions" of political power and not reduce it to its discursive dimension.

In this regard, Freedman (2018, 610) reminds us how the hybrid media system is shaped by the "vested interests that dominate," and is as a result structured to "enhance corporate accumulation and to inscribe a commercial logic ever deeper into the cultural field"; an argument which dovetails with Habermas' critique of a public sphere in appearance only. Freedman also points to a range of policy failures and silences which taken together make that the media system is not fit for purpose in the fight against populist neo-fascism: the lack of action when it comes to concentration of ownership, an unwillingness to fundamentally regulate tech companies, as well as a failure to protect journalistic independence and strengthen public service media. He subsequently argues for a new media policy paradigm that reverses the capture of the hybrid media system "by corporate and state elites" (Freedman 2018, 615).

This calls for the communicative principles of the lifeworld to become central again within the hybrid media system so that it can facilitate genuine journalistic as well as citizen-led communicative action as opposed to merely being a conduit of instrumental and strategic action (i.e. deception and manipulation). In addition to this, the media should operate on the principle of seeking mutual understanding between social actors instead of being driven and determined exclusively by capital and power (i.e. the driving forces of the system).

In this regard, concerns regarding concentration of ownership, coupled with an emphasis on media pluralism and diversity of content, is compatible with a radical pluralist democracy as envisaged by Mouffe (cf. Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006, 974). Furthermore, social responsibility theory tying the media and journalists to society (rather than the market) is also highly relevant in this context. Mouffe's agonistic model entails the need for "journalistic representations that respect the diversity and contingency of the social and the political, and does not unnecessarily foreclose them" and "a high degree of journalistic sensitivity for […] the workings of ideology and hegemony" (Mouffe quoted in Carpentier and Cammaerts 2006, 972).

Besides a new regulatory paradigm in line with public interests, journalists and the journalistic profession itself, which is very much under attack by populist neo-fascists, could do with a re-reconnecting to the lifeworld as well. Elsewhere, I argued that the civic or public journalism tradition could be a good starting point for this (Cammaerts 2020). This tradition considers journalists and media organisations as "democracy's cultivators" (Rosen 1999, 4) tasked with improving the quality of public discourse and protecting human rights and democratic values.

Public journalism, a movement which emerged in the wake of the English translation of Habermas' postdoctoral thesis, is not without its own issues and contradictions (Haas and Steiner 2001; Peters 1999). Public journalism, for instance, questions rational objectivity and blanket neutrality, but at the same time it foregrounds a consensual deliberative public sphere ideal and the need for journalists to be part and parcel of a strong civic culture, in touch with the lifeworld. In spite of or maybe even because of these contradictions, the public journalism tradition, and especially some of its later articulations which incorporated

Fraser's counter-publics (Haas and Steiner 2001), represents a productive starting point to rebuild a relationship of trust between journalists and citizens, but also to reconnect the hybrid media system captured by economic and partisan political interests with its essential normative task of promoting and defending democracy in the broad and maximalist sense of the word, including its underpinning values of freedom, equality, rights, responsibilities and the rule of law.

## Conclusion

When articulating a middle ground between public sphere theory and its post-structuralist and post-colonial critiques we cannot simply assimilate the latter into the former – or vice versa for that matter – and thereby ignoring the paradigmatic contradictions that were highlighted above. In his critical review of three authors[4] who attempted to salvage Habermas' public sphere by enriching it with insights of Foucault, Derrida and/or Laclau and Mouffe, Lasse Thomassen (2005, 558) clearly outlines the epistemological challenges of doing so:

> if one asserts the inherent contingency of meaning and subjectivity, then one cannot build a theory of validity on the possibility – even if only in theory – of transparent communication. Equally if power is ineradicable, it becomes ultimately impossible to distinguish communicative action from strategic action. If disagreement cannot be eradicated, then any talk of a final rational consensus is either void or would entail the violent imposition of consensus. […] If there is difference all the way down, then there will not only be disagreement about norms, but also about the very procedures for reaching agreement and whether one has reached a rational consensus.

He subsequently argues that the end result of the debate between the public sphere paradigm and its critiques should not be assimilation or a synthesis, which "is neither possible nor desirable," but rather to go "beyond Habermas" (Thomassen 2005, 559). I agree, but what I want to argue here is that in order to confront the populist neo-fascist assault on democracy and democratic values we also need to go *beyond Mouffe*, so to speak.

With regard to the debate between inclusion and exclusion, it is clear that the Habermassian public sphere paradigm excludes too much from the public space. As Korstenbroek (2022, 72) also contends, "it excludes simultaneously the radical-right populists themselves, as well as the out-groups they oppose." The radical pluralism of the agonistic model, however, also has its limitations when it comes to its potential to protect democracy and the ethico-political foundations of freedom and equality (Glover 2012). As argued above, the relationship between democrats and non-democrats is essentially an antagonistic one; in other words, a *hard border* needs to exist between democrats and anti-democrats such as populist neo-fascists, especially due to a lack of a shared set of ethico-political principles that make democratic conflict and debate possible. It is, in my view, impossible to enact the democratic task of turning antagonisms into agonisms in the context of the anti-fascist struggle.

Furthermore, and this problematises things even further, while some political actors and parties can easily be positioned within the category of anti-democratic neo-fascism, there increasingly exist a large group of political actors and discourses that could be considered *borderline* (Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017). Many mainstream rightwing political actors who share the agonistic space have increasingly appropriated populist neo-fascist

discourses, tropes, tactics, and communication styles, thereby also becoming complicit in normalising them and in turn undermining and devaluing said ethico-political democratic principles (Cammaerts 2020). In other words, the radical polarisation celebrated by the agonistic model has started to erode the democratic values and foundations that it aims to revive, both in Western democracies and beyond. This requires a more sustained focus on what is shared amongst democrats (i.e. on constructing the chain of equivalence) rather than on what divides us.

The debate regarding the dichotomy between emotions and rationality invites us to consider not only the potentially toxic role that (negative) emotions play in the public space and in a democracy, but to also validate the positive attributes of emotions for political participation and public engagement. We must, however, also be cognisant of how some of the post-structural critiques, for example with regard to the contingency of rationality and factuality, have been weaponised against democracy and how some liberal values such as freedom of speech and the right to offend are mobilised to destroy others.

Here, moving beyond both the public sphere paradigm and its post-structuralist critiques implies revaluing the role of rationality, veracity and factuality whilst at the same time acknowledging their contingent character and how they are shaped by both symbolic and material power. In this regard, I suggested combining epistemic relativism with ontological and judgmental rationality to envisage a *communicative radical democracy* able to protect itself and push back against the relentless attacks of populist neo-fascism by acknowledging the productive role of emotions and passions in a democracy as well as assert a degree of rationality, unity and common ground with regards to ethico-political principles and truth claims, as Young (1996, 126–127) also advocates.

Critical scholarship by and large deems the capitalist hybrid media system to be complicit in and actively promoting the rise of populist neo-fascism, but as argued above the hybrid media system needs to be re-situated inside the democratic fightback; it needs to be defeudalised. In considering normative justifications for public interventions in the context of (public) ownership, as well as promoting media diversity and a socially responsible hybrid media system, is arguably where the public sphere and agonistic paradigms meet, somewhat. Just as the need to abide by a set of ethico-political principles is advocated by both, we should also add to these a set of basic *ethico-mediation principles* for a democratic media, which should apply to legacy as well as social media. Where public sphere theory and its critiques of course differ is on whether this hybrid media system needs to actively contribute to achieving a rational consensus or conversely be a platform for the exposure of hegemony and expression of dissensus.

In line with the middle ground position defended here, maybe it should be both; conflict- and hegemony-revealing as well as solution- and compromise-oriented. Either way, as Freedman (2018) also indicates, a new media and communication policy paradigm is desperately needed. One which aims to dislocate (or at the very least loosen) the hybrid media system from capitalist and corporate interests, and which is invested in repositioning the values of the lifeworld within it. Besides this, it was suggested that the media system needs to act itself to reconnect with citizen interests and democratic values and the public journalism tradition could serve as inspiration for this.

What all this also speaks to is the urgent need to have more thorough and above all more systematic agonistic and deliberative debates about the limits of free speech, about the kind of media system we want as a democratic society and about what its role in it should be. Frederik Schauer (1995, 13) once wrote that there is “little free thought about

free thought, little free inquiry about free inquiry and little free speech about free speech"; the same could be said about the lack of public and democratic debate about the public sphere. A public sphere about the public sphere should, however, not be invested in making the public sphere disappear from our theory building, but rather to radically "reinterpret it from a broader societal perspective," as also argued by Slavko Splichal (2022, 213).

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

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## NOTES

1. When speaking of antagonism, Mouffe (1999) refers to the friend/enemy distinction as articulated by Carl Schmitt, a Nazi ideologue. Schmitt not only provided justifications for anti-democratic fascist rule, but also positioned the enemy as legitimate to destroy. I reject this view, for obvious reasons, but would also argue that it is perfectly possible in a democracy to consider neo-fascists as enemies of democratic values (and keeping them away from power) without aspiring to annihilate them physically.
2. This North-Belgian neo-fascist party was forced to change its name in 2004 after a conviction by the Belgian courts for incitement of racial hatred.
3. It has to be noted though that the relationship between Fox News and Trump is volatile. Whereas the Murdoch-owned station is mostly reverential and uncritical of Donald Trump, the former US president still lambasts the broadcaster on a regular basis, for example when it dares to give a platform to a critical voice or when they are positive about his rivals. This more often than not results in Fox News towing the Trump line (Stelter 2024).
4. Omid A. Payrow Shabani, Pieter Duvenage and Mark Devenney.

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