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The mass media, democracy and the public sphere

Book section

Original citation: Originally published in Livingstone, Sonia and Lunt, Peter, (eds.) *Talk on television audience participation and public debate*. London : Routledge, UK, 1994, pp. 9-35.

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Original citation:

Livingstone, S., and Lunt, P. (1994) The mass media, democracy and the public sphere. In *Talk on Television: Audience participation and public debate* (9-35). London: Routledge.

Chapter 2 **The mass media, democracy and the public sphere**

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we explore the role played by the mass media in political participation, in particular in the relationship between the laity and established power. There is a long-running debate in media theory over the ways in which the media not only disseminate elite, critical opinion but also influence the formation, expression and consumption of public opinion (Halloran, 1970; Lang and Lang, 1968). How far do the mass media provide a public sphere in which citizens may debate issues in a democratic forum and in which those in power may be held accountable to the public? In this chapter we examine the way television is responding to economic and regulatory pressures to move from a public service model towards a market model (Blumler, 1992; Collins et al. 1986; Garnham, 1990; Qualter, 1991); the media are changing their relation to political processes.

These changes affect the relationship between ordinary people and elite representatives of established power. There is a concern in liberal democracies about having an involved public. Here we are interested not so much in the degree of involvement but in different types of involvement. There is a difference between an elite democracy where communication between established power and the laity takes the form of dissemination from the powerful and the representation of ordinary beliefs as mass opinion, and a participatory democracy where established power is engaged in some kind of dialogue with the public. Recently this debate has centred on how to conceive of the role of the citizen in modern western democracies.

Both the left and right of the political spectrum are concerned with the individual as citizen, and with undermining the authority of the expert or elite (Andrews, 1991; Barbalet, 1988). The right attacks experts for their abstract, biased or ungrounded authority over the laity. They argue for reductions in restrictions on broadcasting to encourage competition according to market forces and audience demand, thereby putting pressure on the existing broadcast channels to become more accessible and populist. The left has also been concerned with the rights of individuals and the validity of everyday experience. While for the political right, citizenship signifies community, self-help and 'Victorian' morality, for the left, citizenship emphasizes human rights and civil liberties: 'citizenship, therefore, combines in rather unusual ways the *public* and *social* with the *individual* aspects of political life' (Held, 1991:21).

Access programmes, talk shows and audience discussion programmes all capture elements of these concerns, providing a diverse appeal for both the audience and the experts, who, whether on the left or the right, have reasons and justifications for participating. It may be reason enough that the media are a powerful force in contemporary society, being increasingly implicated in the

construction of political events and the management of political decisions (see, for example, Garton et al. 1991; Keane, 1991; Raboy and Dagenais, 1992).

Thus the debate over political involvement and communication has recently focused on the notion of 'citizenship', and one aspect of this concern is with the notion of the 'public sphere'. If the citizenry is to play a role in a democracy then it needs access to an institutionally guaranteed forum in which to express their opinions and to question established power. We will argue that the media now constitute the major forum for political communication. Thus the debate about public involvement of citizens in political communication leads to questions about the media as a public sphere where the relations between established power and the citizenry take place.

The starting point we have chosen for our discussion of the media as a public sphere of political communication is the work of Habermas (1984; 1989) on the bourgeois public sphere. Influenced by critical theory, Habermas sees the media as creating a society of private and fragmented individuals for whom it is difficult to form the public rational-critical opinion which could oppose established power. He attacks the media for providing a pseudo-public sphere which distracts the laity from political action, being a sphere of public relations and passive spectatorship rather than genuine public debate. However, Habermas's position (1987b) contains within it an ideal of public communication: if unfettered by institutional control, this ideal public communication might generate the critical consensus which he considers necessary for public participation in democratic political processes. Can the media potentially provide sites for public participation, expert accountability, integration of expert and lay knowledge and the provision of ideal communicative situations?

Habermas's position reflects the ambivalence felt by many towards the mass media—that here is a great power, but can it be harnessed for the public good? We suggest that pessimistic answers tend to underestimate the complex and contradictory or fragmented nature of the contemporary mass media which opens the way for some escape from institutional control, while more optimistic positions often set too high ideals for the public sphere. Those alternative formulations of the public sphere which recognise and build on the complex and fragmentary nature of the media suggest more positively that the media could facilitate and legitimize the public negotiation—through compromise rather than consensus—of meanings among oppositional and marginalized groups.

ELITE AND PARTICIPATORY CONCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

'Democracy' is generally used to refer to the rights and responsibilities of citizens in capitalist economies. The will of the people, as expressed through representation, consent and participation, plays a central role in legitimating a democracy:

Any claim that a certain state or government, regime or society is 'really' or 'in the last analysis' democratic, however implausible it may seem, must involve the implication that in some way or other the government, regime or state in question serves or represents the people.
(Arblaster, 1987:8–9)

The starting point for modern theories of democracy is consent, for it is the idea that government is an artifice, legitimated only by the agreement of subjects who are 'naturally' free, that revived the democratic tradition.

(Phillips, 1991:23)

The mass media play a crucial role in the modern political process, for even in elite forms of democracy, the polity requires some mediated communication with the populace to gain consent. Freedom of expression has long been seen as essential to protecting the rights of the individual from political tyranny: a government legitimated through consent depends on a free press (Keane, 1991; Koss, 1984). However, this mediation is not neutral but affects how political processes are communicated. Talking of general elections, it is clear that 'talk is endlessly circulated around all these sites [media, politics, public relations, press conferences] in practices of commentary, quotation and polemical reformulation. Statements are thus re-presented in different discursive domains, and in this re-presentation they are transformed' (Garton et al. 1991:100).

As the implied audience for the liberal press was the bourgeois individual, the individual was affirmed as the basic social, moral and political unit. Within the democratic tradition one can envisage a dimension of public involvement in political processes. At one end the populace has little direct role in politics but policies should be enacted in the public interest with the consent of the people. At the other extreme, ordinary people participate in the political process through voting, lobbying, inquiry, membership of political parties and trade unions, and so forth. The poles of this opposition can be used to understand a transformation from an elite to a participatory democracy. One can account for recent changes in contemporary democracies in terms of this transition.

Two problems beset this progressive conception of democracy; one is bureaucratization and the other is inequalities in political influence. The mass media contribute to both these problems, for they are social organizations which institutionalize particular forms and rights of access, modes of participation and types of influence. The political role of the media is not, therefore, simply dependent on the nature of the political process; because it mediates political communications, the workings of the mass media are also constitutive of that process. Mediated political control of the masses is easier in an elite democracy, where the media are under pressure to propound critically the ideas of the political elite to the populace. Under a more participatory democracy, control over and access to media production processes by the public becomes a vital dimension of political participation.

However, there is no necessary connection between the development of mediated systems of communication and the development of participatory democracy. For example, while there is a vast difference between the practice of democratic government in ancient Greece and the modern democratic tradition, significant features of participatory democracy also existed in those earlier times (Held, 1987). Although some were excluded from the status of citizen, the argument for individual rights has gradually led to their inclusion (see, for example, the extension of the franchise to women; Phillips, 1991). The idea of citizens' political participation suggests a democracy where individuals have a responsibility to act in the political process beyond their personal interest. This contrasts with a democracy whose concern is the provision of protective environments within which individuals can conduct their own business. For Locke, this latter

was to be achieved by restricting the rights of rulers and the legitimate sphere of political decision making, resulting in a political culture based on respect for leaders and on very limited involvement in the political process for the ruled. As one of our respondents commented:

That is certainly one of my worries, that people don't think about what is happening, and it's not really their fault, it's just the way society is going now. You work, you get a pay cheque, and you want to spend the rest of the time having fun and you don't want to think about that sort of thing [i.e. politics]. (P2.157)

While one might have expected that the gradual move towards participatory democracy would have produced a greater sense of public involvement in politics, there is some evidence of growing public apathy and a less stable electoral profile, with swings and unpredictable election results resulting from more uncommitted voters (Heath and Topf, 1987; Parry et al. 1992). There are two arguments to be made here. Firstly, the shift to participatory democracy coincides with the expansion of the mass media, and many, including Habermas (see below) attribute public apathy to the effects of the media in undermining traditional class affiliations and transforming political debate into a managed show. Secondly, Heath and Topf (1987) suggest that we are seeing a change in modes of participation as social changes since the war have produced a greater section of the population who are politically confident and competent. Ideally, they suggest a widening of the definition of civic culture beyond that of deference and involvement to include attitudes to the economic and social order: economic equity, civil liberty, and law and order are all issues which constitute the political consciousness of the modern electorate:

What we have found, then, is evidence of widespread but long-standing distrust of politicians, coupled with a widespread and growing self-confidence on the part of the electorate to try to bring influence to bear on parliament. There is no evidence, however, that either phenomenon implies any loss of respect for democratic procedures.

(Heath and Topf, 1987:58)

Let us not take too simplistic a view of political involvement and power. If we conceptualize the political subject only as a voter then the intersection between political and social life is restricted to struggles over the franchise. However, as forms of political involvement diversify to include broader aspects of social relations, then the political subject incorporates the multiple subject positions that characterize these social relations. If the person becomes political then what constitutes a political person becomes more complicated:

I affirm...the existence in each individual of multiple subject positions corresponding both to the different social relations in which the individual is inserted and to the discourses which constitute these relations.

(Mouffe, 1988:90)

However, Mouffe (1988) argues that the politicizing of social relations is a function of the post-war expansion of market capitalism and need not imply greater political power for those involved. Indeed, the contrary may be true, and she points to 'new social movements' such as feminism which offer resistances to new types of oppression which are emerging in advanced capitalist societies. The questions which she asks of these social movements might also be asked of other parties drawn into this wider conception of political participation, including the mass media:

- (1) What kind of antagonism do the new social movements express?
- (2) What is their link with the development of capitalism?
- (3) How should they be positioned in a socialist strategy?
- (4) What are the implications of these struggles for our conception of democracy?

(Mouffe, 1988:89)

PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY AND PARTICIPATORY MASS MEDIA

Carpignano et al. (1990) argue that in audience discussion programmes:

The crisis of the bourgeois public sphere is fully visible and displayed in front of our eyes. The crisis of representational democracy is the crisis of the traditional institutions of the public sphere, the party, the union etc., and most importantly, the present mass refusal of politics. If we think about the reconstitution of a public sphere in terms of the revitalization of old political organizations...then the embryonic discursive practices of a talk show might appear interesting, but ultimately insignificant...but if we conceive of politics today as...consolidated in the circulation of discursive practices rather than formal organizations, then a common place that formulates and propagates common senses and metaphors that govern our lives might be at the crossroad of a reconceptualization of collective practices.

(Carpignano et al. 1990:54)

This view captures the ambivalence of many towards the potential of the mass media. Optimists and pessimists base their cases on different and opposed constructions of modernity (Seidman, 1990): one can analyse the media as part of the secular, millennial myth of progress or as part of the apocalyptic myth of darkness and decline. For the pessimistic approach of the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, rationality is lost as mass culture increasingly dominates popular consciousness, offering only a consumerist culture to satisfy false, commodified desires. Some would argue that a culture of critical discourse still exists, both in academia and also as a strand surviving in public organizations and the mass media (Gouldner, 1976).

The position of the Frankfurt School has been attacked most recently by postmodern theorists for whom society is too fragmented and heterogeneous for any unitary description. Instead they advocate 'an ideal of a more open, decentralised society that values differences and permits fluidity in desires, identity, and institutional order' (Seidman, 1990:234). Either position suggests a potentially radical role for the media through, for example, the audience discussion programmes. The programmes may offer either a forum for the critical discussion of contemporary political and social issues or alternatively they may provide opportunities for the expression of diverse social identities.

The move from elite to participatory social and political arrangements is resulting in changes within the mass media from the paternalistic 'auntie' of elite programming to a potentially more responsive and open medium. Our focus is on the growth of broadcast genres involving open access or audience participation. These can be seen to challenge traditional oppositions between producer and audience, text and reader, expert and laity, and the response of the audience has been shown by recent media research on the active, interpretive, sometimes resistant, and even subversive audience of popular culture (Curran, 1991; Livingstone, 1990; Morley, 1980). Consequently, some are enthusiastic about such forms of programming (Scannell, 1990),

anticipating greater participation and involvement for the viewers, a transfer of power from a paternalistic media to an 'active viewer' (Livingstone, 1990) or 'citizen viewer' (Corner, 1991).

Nonetheless, a critical perspective on the mass media in general and on audience access and participation programmes in particular has long existed, suggesting that such programmes are a trick to capture a passive, mass audience through the illusion of influence and involvement. Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) argued that the media have a narcotizing function on their audience, undermining the practice of democracy: 'modern media may encourage citizens to know more, even to be more opinionated, but to do less about public affairs' (Tuchman, 1988:604). Similarly, commenting on media debates, Habermas claims that 'critical debate arranged in this manner certainly fulfils important social-psychological functions, especially that of a tranquillizing substitute for action' (Habermas, 1989:164). Lang and Lang (1983:21) claim that 'the mass public is still condemned to a bystander role...privy to, but not part of, the give-and-take through which parties with conflicting interests hammer out an acceptable policy'. The ever-increasing importance of opinion polls in elections suggests to some one way in which 'the media discourage political participation and meaningful social change' (Tuchman, 1988:604), providing a 'managed show' (Thompson, 1990) of public participation without any accompanying influence, role or power. Elliot (1986) argues that we face 'a continuation of the shift away from involving people in society as political citizens of nation states towards involving them as consumption units in a corporate world' (Elliot, 1986:106).

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.

(Habermas, 1984:49)

Habermas (1987a, 1987b; see also Fraser, 1989) argues for four domains of modern social life, divided according to two dimensions: public versus private and system-integrated (roughly, based on strategic calculations and mechanistic functions concerned with money and power) versus socially-integrated (roughly, based on consensual references to moral norms and values). Material reproduction is the function of the official capitalist economy and the modern administrative state; both of these are system-integrated, but the economy is part of the private domain while the state is public. Symbolic reproduction (involving socialization, solidarity formation and cultural transmission) is the function of the two socially-integrated institutions of the modern 'life-world'—the private family and the public sphere.

The two private domains have historically been linked by the roles of worker and consumer, while the public domains have been linked by the roles of citizen and client. Habermas makes the further, historical argument that influence, having once flowed from socially-integrated to system-integrated domains, is now flowing the other way around, colonizing the life-world and undermining the public sphere. Fraser (1989) notes that these roles are gendered (consumer and client are feminine, worker and citizen are masculine) and adds in a fifth role, that of childrearer. She argues that influence also flows from the family to the economy and the state. However, she

would agree with Habermas that the relations between system and life-world and the 'health' of the contemporary life-world are major concerns.

The mass media, primarily concerned with symbolic reproduction, address both family and public sphere and have complex relations with both economy and state. Does the impact of the media inevitably result in the fragmentation of public opinion or can a more positive role for the media in the formation of a discursive public sphere be worked out? For Habermas (1989), the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) is a space where private individuals discuss public matters, a space which mediates between society and the state. The public sphere has a potential influence over power by forming a critical consensus which produces a coherent public opinion and by making the state accountable to its citizens: 'the public sphere is...what one might call the factory of politics—its site of production...the space in which politics is first made possible at all and communicable' (Kluge, 1981–2:213). Central to the public sphere is 'the necessity of discursive justification of democratic politics' (Benhabib, 1992:119).

As widespread concern grows over the way in which the public service ethos is being destroyed and replaced by a market model (Qualter, 1991) while communication and information technologies expand and diversify, Habermas's discussion of the public sphere offers much to a critical analysis of the relationship between media, power and the public. The argument is a historical one: Habermas argues that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there emerged a 'bourgeois public sphere [which] created a forum in which the authority of the state could be criticized and called upon to justify itself before an informed and reasoning public' (Thompson, 1990:109). This forum was founded on the principle of 'publicness', 'that the personal opinions of private individuals could evolve into a public opinion through the rational-critical debate of a public of citizens which was open to all and free from domination' (Thompson, 1990:112).

Habermas's account has attracted criticism as a historical account of the rise and fall of the public sphere, for the scrutiny of revisionist historiography suggests it to be more of an idealization than a historical reality (Curran, 1991; Eley, 1992). However, it may and does still serve as 'a usefully mobilising fiction' (Robbins, 1990a: 3), particularly in amending the failure of Marxist critical social theory to distinguish sufficiently between the state and societal forums for public discussion (Fraser, 1990). This has led to an emphasis on the coercive, hegemonic role of the state in regulating broadcasting and on the cynical aims of the commercial broadcasting model:

Mass culture has earned its rather dubious name precisely by achieving increased sales by adapting to the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of consumer strata with relatively little education, rather than through the guidance of an enlarged public toward the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance.

(Habermas, 1989:165)

Television viewers might agree here:

People are generally having less and less time to take anything seriously, and I feel that commercial pressures will feed into that because they are totally dependent on the sponsors,

so you don't want all this heavy stuff, you just want a bit of light stuff, trivialization like the *Sun* newspaper. (D3.151)

The BBC seem to be saying that they have a free voice, and yet they have always been terribly establishment, haven't they? Are they changing? (D4.184)

The market may be transforming the media into an unrepresentative, nonparticipatory system, a system made up of major, centralized monopolies, which together offer a narrower and more uniform ideological and cultural range of meanings (Curran, 1991). However, there has been insufficient theorizing of any positive vision of a public service ethic—of how broadcasting 'should' be (although see Blumler, 1992). As market models of broadcasting are partly legitimated through a critique of the elitist and patronizing aspects of the public service ethic, an emancipatory rather than an oppressive conception of the public service ethic is needed to counter the arguments for a market-led broadcasting system (Garnham, 1990; Keane, 1991; Tebbutt, 1989). After all, 'the television network, airways, belong to all of us' (P4.150) and we all know that:

There are countries surely where they're not allowed to talk like we are, wasn't it Russia or was it in Germany, something like this? I mean, we can raise our opinions and we can discuss. (SC.320)

Arguing more positively now, Habermas claims that:

The *bourgeois public sphere* could be understood as the sphere of private individuals assembled into a public body, which almost immediately laid claim to the officially regulated 'intellectual newspapers' for use against the public authority itself... To the principle of the existing power, the bourgeois public opposed the principle of supervision—that very principle which demands that proceedings be made public.

(Habermas, 1984:52)

THE MASS, THE PUBLIC, THE AUDIENCE

The concept of 'the public' has become caught up in debates over the mass media, mass consumption, feminism and democracy (Fraser, 1989). People have become suspicious of those who speak in the name, or interest, of the public (Robbins, 1990a)—as indeed, they may have of all metanarratives (Lyotard, 1984). Robbins (1990b) analyses the various rhetorical and justificatory appeals made through the use of the term 'public', where sometimes public is opposed to the market and aligned with the intellectuals, and sometimes it is opposed to the elite and aligned with consumerism:

The current crisis of representation that subjects all 'representatives' as such to the immediate charge of abusing/inventing the 'public' from which they claim to derive legitimacy might be seen as a phenomenon produced *by* the market, and as serving the capitalist status quo rather better than it serves the public interest.

(Robbins, 1990b: 105)

Traditionally, social theory distinguishes between the public and the mass (Robbins, 1990b). In contrast with the mass, Mills (1959) characterized the public as egalitarian, for as many people

express opinions as receive them, as operating a form of communication which permits immediate and effective feedback, as affording the translation of public opinion into effective action even against the *status quo* or authority; and as constructing an autonomous public opinion. Institutional control over mass communication means that fewer express than receive opinions, and feedback is made near impossible for an individual. Moreover, the authorities control whether or not the outcome of expressed opinion leads to action.

In some ways, the public versus mass debate parallels that over the active versus passive audience which has recently occupied media theory (see Chapter 4). The concept of the active viewer counters images of the viewer as duped, mindless, brainwashed or manipulated. It has been supported by both the failures of effects research (Roberts and Bachen, 1981) and the successes of audience comprehension and reception research (Ang, 1985; Corner, 1991; Liebes and Katz, 1990; Livingstone, 1991) which demonstrate that viewers play an active role in the construction of programme meanings, as influenced by the viewer's sociocultural and family context (Liebes and Katz, 1990; Morley, 1986), their uses and gratifications in viewing (Blumler, Gurevitch and Katz, 1985) and their sociocognitive processes of reception and interpretation (Livingstone, 1990).

How we think about the active or passive viewer depends on our theoretical framework. The economic and production framework of early media research led to a concern with the viewer as alienated worker (seen as passive, male, a viewer of news and action-adventure)—a problem for the private domain (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1977; Halloran, 1970). The viewer as conceived by British Cultural Studies is the consumer-viewer, seen as resistant, subversive, female—a consumer of soap opera, magazines and romances, again understood as being within the private domain (Curti, 1988; Hall, 1980; Hobson, 1982). Now we have the citizen-viewer, seen as participating, potentially at least, in democratic processes of the public sphere (Corner, 1991; Curran, 1991), processes which may be more accessible to many women than the public sphere has been hitherto, being also part of domestic, daytime television. As more ordinary people participate in making television programmes as well as receiving them, this gives new force to the concept of the active viewer. In this chapter we examine the argument that participation in the mass media, as audience or as programme contributor, may count as acting as a public rather than as a mass and hence as political participation.

THE REFEUDALIZATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Habermas (1989) argues that the public sphere exists now only as a promise. Party politics and the manipulation of the mass media have resulted in 'a "refeudalization" of the public sphere, where representation and appearances outweigh rational debate' (Holub, 1991:6) and where the rational-critical public is transformed into a mass, manipulated by persuasive authority. The public sphere has been undermined by, among other factors, class biases in criteria of admission, the expansion of an interventionist state, new techniques of opinion management and a loss of institutional meeting places. 'This *refeudalization of the public sphere* turns the latter into a theatre and turns politics into a managed show in which leaders and parties routinely seek the acclamatory assent of a depoliticized population' (Thompson, 1990:113). Thus:

Large organizations strive for political compromises with the state and with each other, excluding the public sphere whenever possible. But at the same time the large organizations

must assure themselves of at least plebiscitary support from the mass of the population through an apparent display of openness.

(Habermas, 1984:54)

The mass media are a medium of talk, of communicative action, of potential consensus: 'today newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere' (Habermas, 1984:49). To the extent that refeudalization has occurred, Habermas is highly critical of the role of the media in the public—or pseudo-public—sphere. He argues that we have moved from a culture-debating to a culture-consuming public:

The deprivatized province of interiority was hollowed out by the mass media; a pseudo-public sphere of a no longer literary public was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity.

(Habermas, 1989:162)

Marx 'denounced public opinion as false consciousness: it hid before itself its own true character as a mask of bourgeois class interests' (Habermas, 1989:124). Following Marx, it has been argued that, as the public is divided against itself into property owners and the workers, there can be no unified public voice (or 'general public'), no-one can abstract from their particular class position to speak for everyone, and 'citizens' now expect services to be provided for them without having to participate politically. Political communication, particularly during election campaigns, may be seen to be managed or 'designed' increasingly by the mass media (Lang and Lang, 1983; Negrine, 1989; Nimmo and Combs, 1990). Private voting patterns do not add up to Habermas's conception of public opinion: they are not formed rationally, nor in discussion with others, and so do not constitute critical, rational participation. Parliament can be seen as evolving away from a debating body, so that the real decisions are made more through political lobbying, committees and prearranged deals (Grant, 1989), and the debating chamber becomes a display of party unity rather than of genuine debate (Thompson, 1990). The televising of parliament made this change public, and maybe exacerbated it:

Since we have seen parliament and question time, we've all changed our views on parliament. In parliament you don't deviate from your strongly held view, you just get up and contradict. (SC.523)

As traditional social class ties weaken, a political culture of persuasion has grown up, where ideas are paraded as goods for the electorate to consume rather than as representing underlying class interest or other political ideology. In the mass media also, the elite try to persuade and the mass consume according to personal taste. As media effects and attitude persuasion research has shown (Bryant and Zillman, 1986; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981), even those who are informed and do argue in public spaces often tend only to mutually confirm their previous ideas: 'most people have got a very definite view on politics and they are not going to change their minds' (F1.149). Thus argument does not necessarily result in public opinion change but rather becomes an opportunity to express diverse persuasive appeals:

Publicity loses its critical function in favour of a staged display; even arguments are transmuted into symbols to which again one can not respond by arguing but only by identifying with them.

(Habermas, 1989:206)

POSSIBILITIES FOR CRITICAL–RATIONAL PUBLIC DEBATE

Habermas (1987b) later holds open the possibility of rational debate, thus suggesting the incompleteness of the process of refeudalisation in the public sphere. Based on a universal pragmatics whose principles specify the conditions which make utterances possible, he outlines a model of undistorted rational communication which is essential for the potentially emancipatory role he assigns to public discourse in a democratic society. So, while the bourgeois public sphere failed because it could never satisfy the institutional conditions for open dialogue, the possibility remains that language itself may escape institutional control. That the refeudalisation of the public sphere is as yet incomplete is supported by the active audience debate. Because of the complexities and technological developments of modern media:

The individuals who receive mediated messages have acquired new forms of power and a new awareness of rights...it has also given [political] leaders a new visibility and vulnerability before audiences which are more extensive and endowed with more information and more power...than ever before.

(Thompson, 1990:115)

Thus the individual may not simply be the passive consumer which the media—and critics of the culture industry—often assume. One may argue that in contemporary society it is not possible for the media to fashion the world so completely and consistently, that no attempt to influence can be so successful, so lacking in interstices, so without contradictions. Thus it remains possible that public interests can be served by mass communication. For Habermas, the laity can only retain influence over established power through the development of ‘self-organised public spheres’. The inherent problem with any attempt to organize and galvanize public opinion in the mass media age is that ‘autonomous public spheres can draw their strength only from the resources of largely rationalized life-worlds’ (Habermas, 1987a: 361), thereby risking social control at the moment when the formation and the expression of public opinion takes place.

Consequently, public opinion may function as a critical influence in democratic debate and decisions, or as an object to be moulded, the result of public communication or opinion management. The process of making opinion public may correspondingly be understood as critical or manipulative but however it is understood, the mass media play a central role. In contrast to Habermas’s conception of the mass media as fully institutionalized and all-powerful, there have been some recent attempts to theorize the media as being one of many sources of influence on public opinion. Garnham (1990) attempts to revalue the public service ethic, Ang (1985) analyses the diverse ways in which the media may be seen as either oppressive or emancipatory, and Curran (1991) proposes that the mass media has a radical-democratic potential. These arguments suggest that there are a number of contradictions in the contemporary political functions of television. The media contains both manipulative and emancipatory elements.

Some of the contradictions inherent in the media are illustrated by Scannell’s analysis of how, since the 1930s, the British Broadcasting Corporation has aspired to a representative mediatory role between government and people. For example, it has attempted to provide the public with

both an awareness of the consequences of unemployment and a role in terms of individual action to mitigate those consequences (Scannell, 1986). On the other hand, direct public access to the mass media, which raises problematic issues of political participation, citizenship, public opinion and the active viewer, has traditionally been heavily limited, especially compared to the access given to representatives of elite groups (Scannell and Cardiff, 1991; Tebbutt, 1989). Audience participation has been generally restricted to audience measurement and viewers' letters. While the industry may state that 'we owe it to our audience as well as to ourselves to establish some systematic method of inviting the public to participate in shaping what we do' (Frank Stanton of CBS, 1960, quoted in Bower, 1973), this has probably been valued more by the industry than by the audience itself and has certainly been regarded cynically by social commentators.

The attempt to treat public service listeners as citizens rather than consumers and the subsequent undermining of this attempt by the market model reflects the fundamental contradiction between conceptions of the individual in the political and economic realms (for Habermas, the public and the private realms):

Within the political realm the individual is defined as a citizen exercising public rights of debate, voting, etc., within a communally agreed structure of rules and towards communally defined ends. The value system is essentially social and the legitimate end of social action is the public good. Within the economic realm on the other hand the individual is defined as producer and consumer exercising private rights through purchasing power on the market in the pursuit of private interests, his or her actions being coordinated by the invisible hand of the market.

(Garnham, 1990:110)

While the mass media operate across both realms, 'political communication is forced to channel itself via commercial media' (Garnham, 1990:111), thus prioritizing the individual as private consumer over the individual as public citizen. Social commentators, viewers and viewer organizations believe in widespread and diverse participation in rational public debate. A contemporary problem is that the opposition between public broadcasting and commercial broadcasting has been linked to elite and participatory forms of democracy. Thus one line of justification for commercial conditions in broadcasting is that public broadcasting is elitist. The problem is that commercial interest uses an emancipatory rhetoric offering the illusion of involvement relative to public broadcasting. Neither model allows for the emergence of a critical public sphere. The elite model reduces public to mass opinion and communication to dissemination; the market model uses involvement to position the viewer as consumer rather than citizen. Participatory television such as the audience discussion programmes exist in the interstices of these two models. Public broadcast opens up to the public, commercial television gains a conscience. The move to participation provides the unintended consequences of involvement.

SPECIAL INTEREST GROUPS AND PUBLICITY

You need to have responsible people, authoritative people, civil servants, where the particular area being discussed is an area where civil servants are involved directly in making decisions. You want the decision makers in there, the people who actually have to deal with the problem, if it's the police, you want to have policemen in there, you know. And if it's the

army you need to have some soldiers in there, and I'm sure Kilroy wouldn't hesitate in any of those cases to try and get people to express those points of view. I would be disappointed if any of the organizations concerned were reluctant to allow representatives to go along and express their own personal views.

(George, viewer)

Political parties, special-interest groups, pressure groups, charities and so forth, which operate according to their own internal public spheres, may generate a kind of quasi-public opinion. Their representatives then enter the general public sphere to express opinions which, insofar as they also represent broader public opinion, may contribute to a rational-critical public debate, influence political processes and hold the system accountable. How 'public' the opinion expressed is depends on how the organization's membership is constituted and how it relates to the state, to other social organizations, and to the mass media.

However, special interest groups arise from the private sphere and, together with political parties which arise from the public sphere, they may use the mass media to attempt to squeeze out the public, often obtaining their consent through manipulated acquiescence rather than critical discussion. Associations become concerned with the representative showing of their members in the public sphere—'the aura of personally represented authority' (Habermas, 1989:200) as a part of public relations and the refeudalized public sphere: 'the public sphere becomes the court *before* which public prestige can be displayed—rather than *in* which public critical debate is carried on' (Habermas, 1989:201). If the public sphere is not genuine, accountability cannot be authentic, but is rather a matter of public relations.

Nonetheless, public debate among special interest groups may generate contestation and negotiation, if not critical discussion, as well as the dissemination of interested views. Further, special interest representatives may represent the views of particular, often disempowered publics (such as the disabled or the elderly) who are frequently excluded from the general public sphere of public meetings, public consultations and media debates. Public debate between special interest group representatives thus brings specific or local issues to a wider public and makes conflicts visible.

At least these processes bring significant, previously hidden aspects of political processes into the public domain. The opportunity of influencing the public is so great that special interest groups, established power and members of the public are compelled to run the risk of public exposure. In Habermas's theory, one gets the impression of politics as a complex, emergent process where discussions, debates and negotiations take place in private (in families, committee rooms and the meetings of special interest groups) only coming to the light of critical exposure when they have been formulated clearly and in controlled forms of debate. Participatory programming brings public exposure earlier in this process. Ideas and opinions don't have to be 'well formed' before they can be expressed. Committees don't have to make hard-and-fast decisions to respond on a given issue and special interest groups don't need to have a worked-out position from which to speak. The media thus enter the political process at a more open, less formalized stage, when there are not necessarily any clear opinions, policies or positions which the media can manipulate and control. The interaction between parties to the discussion is discursive rather than a formal exchange of views. Getting involved in discursive exchange

transforms all parties, which is not true of the dissemination of information. However, whether this transformation is one of changing the mode of public relations or whether it changes the processes of politics and everyday life is a question which goes beyond the scope of this book.

THE OPPOSITIONAL PUBLIC SPHERE

The view that the mediated public sphere is an illusion which masks the hegemonic domination of the masses by the bourgeoisie is receiving considerable criticism (Curran, 1991; Garnham, 1990). Lyotard (1984) claims that power cannot be and is not centralized in any one social stratum, but rather that it is dispersed across diverse institutions and discourses, including the mass media. The very idea of 'the public', as unitary, homogenous and able to speak disinterestedly, must be problematized, for it is 'fragmented into a mass of competing interest groups' (Fraser, 1990:59) who may or may not represent fairly all sections of the general public. At times, Habermas does speak of plural public spheres (Benhabib, 1992), although for him, it is vital that they come together, however problematically, with some kind of underlying harmony prior to, and in order for there to be, a confrontation between the public and established power.

For Habermas, the potential for a public sphere exists in the commonalities and consensus which arise through the disinterested exchange of views, weakening traditional boundaries between groups. However, more open, mediated communication between groups in society may not achieve consensus but rather have other consequences, suggesting a reformulation of the character of the contemporary public sphere. Let us consider alternative models of the public sphere based on oppositional, conflictual or radical democratic situations in which diverse social groups discuss, negotiate and dispute.

The tendency of the bourgeois public sphere which concerns Habermas is to become increasingly institutionalized and specialized, and so to increasingly exclude dissenting or critical voices. However, although apparently excluded, dissenting voices tend to form alternative forums for discussion which, for Negt and Kluge, generate an oppositional public sphere: 'a type of public sphere which is changing and expanding, increasing the possibilities for a public articulation of experience' (Kluge, 1981-2:211), for 'in terms of community...what I have in common with other people...is the basis for processes of social change' (ibid: 213). In contrast to the bourgeois public sphere, conflicts of interest are recognized and expected in this proletarian public sphere (Negt and Kluge, 1990). The sociological conditions of this public sphere are not those of access and disinterested contribution but forms of mass communication:

A public sphere can be produced professionally only when you accept the degree of abstraction which is involved in carrying one piece of information to another place in society, when you establish lines of communication. That's the only way we can create an oppositional public sphere and thus expand the existing public sphere. This is an occupation which is just as important as direct action, the immediate on-the-spot struggle.

(Kluge, 1981-2:212)

Others identify possibilities for the public sphere in local contexts where negotiation and debate are institutionally accepted. For example, Mann (1990:81) distinguishes 'between the relatively universal and apolitical public sphere of mass media entertainment, and the vast numbers of de-centered yet highly politicized public spheres currently existing within specific institutional contexts'. Through analysing a specific period of conflict at The City College of New York,

Mann describes the emergence of a political public sphere which aims to ‘formulate unifying discourses capable of providing the basis for consciously chosen communities, in the face of myriad and conflicting interests’ (ibid: 81). This model of the public sphere does not depend on the unifying reason and consensus of Habermas’s public sphere nor on the inevitable conflicts between opposed counterpublics in the oppositional public sphere. Rather, it emphasizes the possibility for the negotiation of provisional unifying discourses in local spaces where a shared conception of community and joint action may have broken down.

In practice, the bourgeois public sphere excluded major sections of society (women, the working class, children). This specialization restricted the diversity of meanings which contribute to opinion formation. Ironically, it also resulted in a host of marginal and conflicting voices, supporting the development of special interest groups to represent these repressed voices in a public sphere based on opposition or negotiation:

Arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the ideal of participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public.

(Fraser, 1990:66)

We have seen that there is a debate occurring over the constitution of an ideal public sphere which differs in terms of the implications of organizing the public sphere prior to publication and debate. The two positions we have outlined suggest that either the public sphere should only include positions organized at the level of having gained social consensus, or that the process of public debate should be opened up at the point of contest and opinion formation. The Habermasian bourgeois public sphere also differs from the oppositional (or negotiation-based) public sphere in terms of the proposed character of rational–critical public debate. In the former, rational–critical debate involves reasoned consideration of other positions to generate a genuine amendment of original positions in the light of new arguments. The latter does not generate such a consensus, but rather aims for a negotiated compromise: each side brings pre-prepared arguments which carry rhetorical rather than rational weight so as to achieve the best compromise as judged by the more persuasive side. Neither side need concede the other’s arguments but merely agrees a midway position.

Both forms of debate are reasoned, democratic procedures and both may be included by the mass media although the management of these different debate forms would differ. The bourgeois public sphere requires power inequalities to be transcended in the search for a consensus in favour of the public good. The oppositional public sphere attempts explicitly to balance differences, facilitating the representation of the less powerful and regulating the discourse of the more powerful in order to arrive at a fair and workable compromise.

In all these conceptions of the public sphere a heavy burden is placed on dialogue, particularly when ‘people participate in more than one public’ (Fraser, 1990:70) and when these publics may overlap. Surely the mass media have a potentially significant role to play in bringing diverse cultures or groups together in discussion? Abrams argues that ‘the universality of broadcasting puts the media in a false relation to society. They are impelled to treat as homogenous what is in fact a tangle of more or less dissimilar groups’ (Abrams, 1964:53). However, in the oppositional public sphere, the media may play a potentially emancipatory role, albeit unintended, if we see

appearing on television as cutting across the exclusions of traditional forms of representation. Television potentially disrupts the attempt to control involvement in and access to public debates, not simply by influencing such events but by transforming them into 'media events' in which a more diverse public may play a role. This forces the political into the personal arena and makes possible a form of life politics (Giddens, 1991). In contrast, Habermas is mainly concerned with the ways that the media as industrial institutions may disrupt the expression and construction of consensus in the life-world. While Habermas focuses on the disruption of the life-world and Fraser focuses on the transformation of political processes, both these are concerned with the potentially disruptive and transformative effects of the mass media.

Drawing on both liberal and critical traditions, Curran (1991) offers a radical democratic theory of the mass media. A democratic mass media should represent all significant interest groups, thereby 'assisting the equitable negotiation or arbitration of competing interests through democratic processes' (Curran, 1991:30). While this requirement is operationalized differently in different countries, it has always been present over the history of the mass media, at least through the radical and alternative press. Curran argues for wider public access to the mainstream media so that special interest groups, pressure groups and so forth, may counter the privileged access and impact of elite groups. On this view, 'the media are assumed to be caught in an ideological crossfire rather than acting as a fully conscripted servant of the social order' (Curran, 1991:37).

For Habermas, public criticism has been appropriated by the culture industry, transforming the public into a mindless mass. As the system increasingly penetrates the life-world, any institutional space from which the public might oppose established power, such as that once provided by the bourgeois public sphere, is undermined and a crisis of legitimation results. Proponents of the oppositional public sphere regard the legitimation crisis as resulting from established power imposing elite views on the public, (mis)conceived as a homogeneous mass, such that the actual diversity of voices is excluded from the public sphere. For while the mindless mass undermines the critical rationality demanded by Habermas, the homogeneous mass undermines the diversity perceived by, for example, Fraser. Habermas wants the public to create a position from which it can debate with established power. He also implies that critical rationality is now lost to the life-world as the public sphere has been refeudalized. Fraser thinks, in contrast, that the life-world is rich in critical voices which go unheard by established power.

Underlying these debates is a question as to whether the public has become fragmented, making collective action impossible or diversified, where diversity has the potential to subvert those ideological processes which construct the public as a mass to be governed. Different answers suggest different solutions to the legitimation crisis. One can focus on instituting a public sphere to produce a consensus which can engage with established power through critical discussion. Here a liberal conception of the self-conscious individual as the locus of reason is presumed—the bourgeois gentleman (Dews, 1987). Or one can aim to give voice to the diversity of subject positions in society so as to subvert the hegemony of the elite and challenge established power into taking account of the various oppositional interests in the public sphere. Or at least, on this latter view, the public might escape or resist state control by deflecting or reappropriating meanings, exploiting the fact that control can only be applied locally and provisionally and refusing the subject position of the mass by responding in unpredictable ways to the dictates of

the state; we borrow here from Foucault's (1970) analysis of power in modern society as distributed, negotiable and ever-shifting.

For Foucault, the possibilities for change are rooted in the fragile, dispersed and contestable nature of power in modern society, not in the construction of an ideal individual or public who will debate 'head to head' with established power. Thus we should not then inquire about the possibilities for an emancipatory media in the sense of either constructing a consensual public opinion to challenge an idealized, centralized established power or giving the oppressed an opportunity to resist. Rather they may provide a site where the distributed processes of power can be enacted and resisted in diverse ways.

To the majority of the public who support the *status quo*, these expectations of conflict and diversity may appear unreasonable:

You have to have a minority to make sure that the other side has its say, whether the minority is the people who complain about their GPs or the gay community or drug pushers. And on the box it looks like it is an equal say. Sometimes you don't always appreciate that the minority is a very small minority. (D4.202)

Sometimes it is an equal voice which they don't deserve. The chap who keeps the rottweilers must be allowed to have his say—the rottweiler is a very nice dog. (D4.204)

POLITICAL ACTION

How do discussions in a public sphere, however conceived, translate into action consequences? For Habermas, there are no longer any such consequences, for in a democracy:

The citizens themselves participate in the formation of collective consciousness, but they cannot act collectively...today politics has become an affair of a functionally specialized subsystem.

(Habermas, 1987a: 360)

Political action is commonly understood in terms of voting: 'according to the theory of democratic government, an informed populace is the bulwark of freedom...it is the citizen's duty to form an opinion about public affairs and to express it at the ballot-box' (Oskamp, 1977:97). However, other forms of expression of public opinion may also be significant, broadening the notion of political action to include the discursive (see Curran, 1991; Gastil, 1992). Indeed, the common-sense opposition between talk and action, with its implicit devaluation of talk, has itself been challenged: talk is action, action is communicative (Austin, 1962; Quinn and Holland, 1987). Mann (1990) provides a case study of how a public sphere, in this case, a local community-based public sphere, can promote actual political action, although she sees the media as relatively disengaged from lived social practices and hence concerned with escape from rather than connection with everyday experiences. Nonetheless:

Public spheres of discursive interaction, such as television, play a large role in bridging or mediating the gap between our unrealized political ideals and our lived social relationships. The interesting questions involve the *quality* of that mediation.

(Mann, 1990:87)

Fraser links the public sphere to a Goffmanian dramaturgical model: 'a theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk' (Fraser, 1990:57; Goffman, 1981). Thus an analysis of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory because, broadly speaking, political theory has hitherto neglected the role of public communication in the democratic process, even though 'changes in media structure and media policy...are properly political questions of as much importance as the question of whether or not to introduce proportional representation, of relations between local and national government, of subsidies to political parties' (Garnham, 1990:104). One wonders why talking face-to-face with one's member of parliament in the MP's surgery or at a public meeting is regarded as political participation, but not talking to one's MP on television, or watching someone else talk to one's MP.

If not political participation, public forums such as access and participation programmes, can be thought of as social events and so involve informal, social participation. This raises questions about the rights and responsibilities of the ordinary person when he or she is transformed into a public social actor and hence about his or her relations to those in power. In a participatory democracy, consent and public participation are mediated in a discursive context which affords opportunities for involvement and dangers of persuasion for the various interested groups in society (Gastil, 1992). Surely the public sphere must affect voting, trade union and pressure group activities and so forth, by affecting the climate of public opinion, by setting the agenda for discussion, and by framing the meaning of key terms in political debate? Interestingly, political participation as narrowly defined is a minority activity—few among the general public participate in pressure groups, trade unions or public meetings, and even voting is dropping off in advanced capitalist countries. A more discursive notion of participation may be as significant for involving the majority of the public in the fairly undemanding activity of talk and opinion formation. Even some of the medium's critics argue that in some programmes:

Not only is information of some public importance effectively communicated, but a contribution is made to the discussion of public issues and a public hitherto excluded from such discussions at any influential level is given access—if only as spectators—to the arenas in which public issues are decided. Television functions, as the Press once functioned, to create and maintain an informed and politically relevant public opinion.

(Abrams, 1964:69)

This positioning of the media as marginal to political processes is being challenged by proponents of oppositional, local and negotiated public spheres. These latter would distinguish between the events which are peripheral and those which have the appearance of the marginal but which significantly affect the negotiation and circulation of meanings in contemporary society (Giddens, 1992; Shields, 1991). Conceived as such a space, the media and popular culture in general are part of discursive democracy rather than a sphere of social activity separated from the political.

THE MASS MEDIA AS CULTURAL FORUM

The development of broadcasting in its institutional forms has had major consequences for modern democratic politics...It became a forum for debate and discussion on current matters of general concern, and thus a new site for the formation of public opinion.

(Collins et al. 1986:212)

Isn't that the climate of today, that people will not be muffled. So you can demand something from television and radio, it is more independent than it used to be. (D4.187)

It's part of the democratic process. It is a good thing to air issues, in general. (D4.91)

Informal, mass mediated participation results in what Newcomb and Hirsch (1984) have termed a cultural forum for topical public discussion and debate, as distinct from, although potentially overlapping with, the public sphere. The cultural forum may not generate a clear and consensual position but rather offers a range of diverse positions, providing an active role for the viewer in debate. In this respect, it is more akin to the oppositional than the bourgeois public sphere. For Newcomb and Hirsch (1984), even if conservative viewpoints are advocated, this is less significant than the airing of the debate: it is the '*range* of response, the directly contradictory readings of the medium, that cue us to its multiple meanings' (Newcomb and Hirsch, 1981:68). While this media discussion occurs in public it is echoed and continued privately in the living room, connecting public forms of argument on television and the formation of private opinion.

What is the product of a public debate? The traditional forum, based on the public sphere, implies not only a multiplicity of voices in debate and disagreement but also rules of debate by which conflicts are addressed, not evaded, and arguments are analysed rather than simply aired. These may be too stringent requirements for the present-day mass media cultural forum, which may more simply place arguments side by side without analysis or integration: the discussion may hold together because it functions as a recognized, and thus 'coherent', social occasion (Livingstone et al. 1992). To debate without conclusion is to celebrate the wisdom of the populace but to fight shy of promoting the insight of popular decisions beyond the bounds of the programme.

Beyond providing people with a 'place' in which to meet (see Chapter 7) and permitting the expression of diverse voices, media debates also provide a source of social representations: 'the equivalent, in our society, of the myths and belief systems in traditional societies; they might even be said to be the contemporary version of common sense' (Moscovici, 1981:181). Indeed, television is increasingly a major medium for the generation of social representations or myths, and discussions and debates play their part here, particularly in popularizing expert knowledge for mass consumption (Livingstone, 1987; Moscovici, 1984).

Moscovici (1984) outlines four conditions for the emergence of social representations, each of which fits the audience discussion programmes (see Chapter 3): the representation of an issue must emerge through the conversation of ordinary people (the studio audience); a vital contribution is provided by 'amateur scholars' who mediate between scientific knowledge and the laity (the experts); the debate is typically held at a time of social concern or crisis (the topical issues); finally, the social representation may emerge through a variety of debate forms, resulting in a vocabulary, lay theories, causal explanations, cognitive frames and prototypical examples (see Livingstone et al. 1992 for this process in discussion programmes).

If participation includes talk as action, then a further consequence of audience participation is the construction and maintenance of social identities and of power relations. However, social and

psychological implications of participating in public spheres, pseudo or genuine are unclear—these form a significant concern of this book. Audience discussion programmes are a forum in which people can speak in their own voice, which, as Gilligan (1982) emphasizes, is vital for the construction of a gendered or cultural identity.

PUBLIC CONTESTATION AND PLURAL VOICES IN THE AUDIENCE DISCUSSION PROGRAMME

For some commentators, the audience discussion programme is an example of the pseudo-public sphere, with little to recommend it:

The very call for a space of open public discussion is closed by the structural demands of that media form in which most discussion today takes place. Reason reveals itself to be what it really is: a show, a spectacle in which truth is not a content but, à la Russian Formalism, a *device*, an alibi, to get excitement going, to make a scene. One watches really more for the excitement, the good fight, than for the enunciating of reasoned positions within the society.

(Polan, 1990:260)

The audience discussion programme may not conform to the bourgeois debate and yet may still be compatible with oppositional conceptions of public spheres as sites of discursive contestation. Apparent lack of structure and control of argumentation may signify communicative conflict rather than emotional noise. For in addition to the specific and diverse public spheres, there must also be:

The possibility of an additional, more comprehensive arena in which members of different, more limited publics talk across lines of cultural diversity...our hypothetical egalitarian, multi-cultural society would surely have to entertain debates over policies and issues affecting everyone. The question is: would participants in such debates share enough in the way of values, expressive norms, and, therefore, protocols of persuasion to lend their talk the quality of deliberations aimed at reaching agreement through giving reasons? In my view, this is better treated as an empirical question than as a conceptual question.

(Fraser, 1990:69)

One approach to this empirical question forms a central focus of this book: are audience discussion programmes a possible space for such communication? How could we determine the success of this communication and what character would the space have? These programmes may be partly about working out ways in which such communication can take place—negotiating a process of communication—rather than actually exhibiting a successful product: less a site where successful communication across diverse publics occurs than one where the exploration of such possibilities is undertaken. Television has a role to play in constructing a space rather than providing one, in negotiating an interactional style, and in bringing together diverse publics rather than displaying a common, unified public.

There are other criteria we can suggest to evaluate audience discussion programmes as public spheres. Following Mills's distinction between public and mass, the participants must be constructed as a public rather than a mass—with equal rights to speak, with feedback, with action consequences and without media manipulation. Also in this oppositional and plural public space, all topics must be permissible (as hosts of audience discussion programmes will agree)—no-one

can speak for humanity in general by prespecifying topics of concern to diverse groups. The public agenda must emerge: it is typically thrown up by events of the day—the contests ‘out there’. Similarly, the definition of a successful conclusion cannot be specified in advance, for different participating publics may draw different conclusions from a debate: emergent conclusions may be plural and not necessarily consensual.

Audience debates also raise issues of the relation between the expert or elite and the public, focusing on questions of knowledge, access and accountability. Lang and Lang (1983:297) concluded from the reporting of Watergate that ‘the ubiquitous presence of television most directly affects the political actors themselves. It forces them to be responsive to norms binding on other members of society’. They argue further that public debate complicates the resolution of political controversies because the media ‘modify the rules of the game, forcing politicians to justify themselves to an ever larger public’ (ibid: 305). Moreover, ‘to have influence, opinion has to be visible’ (ibid: 19). By providing a space for expressing public opinion, access programming implicitly allows public opinion to have influence—a populist move by which broadcasting organizations may claim accountability in terms of an ‘extra-political power base’ (Heller, 1978), apparently ‘seeking direct guidance from the people on the details of policy’ (Lang and Lang, 1983:15).

The cultural significance of putting ordinary people on television, then, is that the viewer is constructed as citizen, with the right to decide policy and the information—the data of everyday experience—on which decisions are based. Audience discussion programmes provide a space in which ordinary experiences are collected together as grounding for a decision, with the help or hindrance of experts:

He managed to fill the studio with people all of whom had something different to contribute, people who were victims, there was a magistrate, there was an MP. You know, he had really done a good job of getting a group of people together who could all add something, and I’ve found this is rather characteristic of Kilroy’s programmes...I found it quite interesting that he had managed to obtain two people to sit in his audience and say that they would not condemn terrorism.

(George, viewer)

However, the participants in Habermas’s public sphere are private citizens, not state officials or official representatives of public bodies. In contrast, audience discussion programmes include members of various ‘official’ bodies (for example, parliament, the health service, charities, the police). These representatives of official state bodies are present in an official ‘public relations’ capacity, and so their presence has no necessary decision-making consequences. They are not acting as private citizens for they are there to be publicly accountable, as part of their official role. For Habermas, it is important that these discussions do not result in decisions, or else the critical potential would be lost—the public would become the state.

However, some public debates do also have decision-making consequences—Fraser discusses the case of parliament; we could add the self-regulating activities of many local publics, as in Mann’s City College of New York example, or residential communities, trade unions, etc. As Fraser (1990) notes, as soon as such internal forums or ‘strong publics’ translate opinion into action, questions arise about their relation to the general public (‘weak publics’) whom they

supposedly represent, and issues of representativeness and accountability come to the fore. There is a trade-off implicit in the construction of public spheres: they may provide open access or establish representatives; they may form opinion only or they may translate this into actions with questionable accountability.

Having argued for plural public spheres rather than a unified consensus, we must ask about the (plural and diverse) relations between public spheres. Particularly, what forms of communication are possible, and how are these managed in relation to state intervention and power inequalities between participants? Fraser argues for a 'post-bourgeois' conception of the public sphere which raises crucial questions for a democratic society. She outlines four criteria for a post-bourgeois public sphere, which resemble Mills's four criteria for a public as opposed to a mass, and which we can here ask directly of audience discussion programmes. Are social inequalities rendered visible? (Who goes on these programmes, how are they selected, what are their motivations for appearing?) How are different publics differentially empowered? (Who speaks, who is silent, who determines what can be said, how is the debate managed, whose voice concludes?) Which topics are labelled public or private? (How are topics selected, what is omitted, how are topics covered or selectively ignored?) How is public opinion translated into political or social action? (What social value or impact do these programmes have?)

Extending the political franchise bestows political rights, which promote political interest beyond voting, and leads to a broader struggle to gain more political power and to the 'widening of social conflict as the extension of the democratic revolution into more and more spheres of social life, into more social relations' (Mouffe, 1988:95; see also Giddens, 1992). In this context, the audience discussion programme, as a forum for the expression of diversity, the contestation of multiple positions, and the interfacing of many discourses, becomes a part of contemporary political processes.

CONCLUSIONS

We have proposed that there are, broadly speaking, two approaches to analysing and assessing the role of the mass media in public life. One account, drawn principally from the work of Habermas, suggests that there is an ideal form of public debate which, if it can find an institutional context, potentially allows equality of access and equal rights to all citizens. This supports the development of public opinion which in turn limits the incursion of bureaucratic and political control into everyday life. On this view, we can ask whether the broadcast media, through access and participation programmes, are offering an institutional forum which orchestrates critical opinion, promoting or undermining the development of consensus between disinterested parties.

Alternatively, critics such as Fraser and Mouffe suggest that the media can facilitate the expression of diverse political and social interests in order to form a working compromise between negotiated positions. Access and voice remain priorities but the underlying model of argumentation (negotiation versus critical discussion) and the underlying functions of the dialogue (compromise versus consensus) are changed, and the significance of social identities and social relations is no longer marginalized. Access and participation programmes should, according to this view, be evaluated in terms of how well they express a diversity of public voices and challenge established power to recognise the complexities of everyday life.

The debate in social theory about the character of the public sphere relates to different political possibilities for the broadcast media:

Among the key advantages of the revised public service model sketched here is its theoretical and practical recognition of complexity. Moving out from under the shadow of Lord Reith, it recognises that 'freedom of communication' comprises a bundle of (potentially) conflicting component freedoms. It acknowledges that in a complex society the original public service assumption that all the citizens of a nation-state can talk to each other like a family sitting down and chatting around the domestic hearth is unworkable; that it is impossible for all citizens simultaneously to be full-time senders and receivers of information; that at any point in time and space some citizens will normally choose to remain silent and only certain other individuals and groups will choose to communicate with others.

(Keane, 1991:164–5)