

**IZLAGANJA**  
**PRESENTATIONS**



## Media and the Public Spheres – European Idea and Ideal

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### SUMMARY

*The present decline of public service broadcasting is related to the transformation of the public sphere driven by the new galaxy of communication. The traditional argument of scarcity no longer applies in times of media and information abundance, and public service broadcasting loses its privileged place of the keeper of the public space. The transformation of the public sphere that is linked to the new media abundance is evidenced by the fragmentation and modularisation of publics served by different types of media. At the micro public level, the local and community media create virtual spaces of the public, at the mezzo level the national media facilitate mezzo publics, and the World Wide Web, faxes and the whole galaxy of communication enable the appearance of the macro publics at the global level. Even though the concept of public service media in its traditional sense is no longer viable, the concept of public spheres remains very important to democracy, as an original.*

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I am a professor and a writer who lives in a think tank where I swim, in public, through fresh ideas that are hopefully relevant for the present and the future of democracy. My subject is javnost – prostor javnosti, the public sphere, the public space. A topic I think which is relevant for politicians, for policy makers, for journalists, for NGOs, and for citizens.

And there are three areas that I want to make some comments about. The three areas are these. First, I want to say something about the decline of public service broadcasting in Western Europe and elsewhere in the world. Secondly, I want to say some-

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thing about prostor javnosti. I want to say something about what this concept of public sphere means and what its implications are for democracy. And thirdly, I want to say something briefly about the current transformation of public space.

The first topic is the decline of public service broadcasting. You know that the public service model rests on the principle that media, communications media are not to be owned or controlled privately, that they are not the private property of business, or government, but their purpose is for the use and enjoyment of a public of citizens.

This is the original early 20th century principle of PSB. This model of PSB set itself a very big agenda: to establish within the countries, a not for politicians, nor for profit, service of mixed programmes on national radio and television, programmes that would be available to everybody at the lowest possible cost, often in the face of the great technical problems and pressing commercial consideration

Public service broadcasting in this sense is today in deep trouble, and that is perhaps unwelcome news for you in Croatia, but I want to suggest how it's possible to get out of trouble. The main reason for this difficulty, for this siege of PSB is the emergence of a new galaxy of communications. I'm using the term galaxy of communications in the sense which the Canadian scholar Marshal McLuhan used this. And I mean by this, a new cluster of communications media, which includes a cable, satellite, and community radio, hand held multifunctional mobile phones and of course computerised networks.

The combined effect of this new galaxy of communications is to destroy the traditional public service argument that there was a certain scarcity of spectrum. This was for example one of the founding principles of the British broadcasting cooperation. And according to that idea of natural scarcity, public service broadcasting should have, as it were, a kind of natural monopoly on radio and television within the boundaries of any given territorial state. That presumption of scarcity of spectrum is now effectively obsolete, and if you look, for instance at publications of the BBC, for instance its classic document in the last few years called "Extending choice" that point is conceded.

What are the effects of this new galaxy of communications? I think we can see three of these effects that are especially important. Most obviously, first of all, there is the growth of what I have called communicative abundance. For example, 24 hours news cycles, the growing integration for the first time of the history of the modern world of sound, text and images. So that in the most media saturated civil societies and states, citizens not only get high on information, they begin to suffer of a certain attention deficit as my friend, the American scholar Michael Shudson puts in. That is to say each of us comes face to face with the practical problem of how to deal with the abundance of information, of stories, of programmes. We begin to resemble the book cruncher described satirically in a novel by Tibor Fisher. The book cruncher was a man who dedicated himself to reading everything, and so he tried to develop the art of reading two books simultaneously. Of course it's impossible and we are all so to say in this position. This is one effect. The second effect I think is that there is a decline in the power of old gate-keeping institutions, like the BBC. Do not be surprised if the gate-keeping role of or the authority of any one outlet to play this gatekeeper role in the field of media begins to decline. We see a widening range of standards of what is publishable and transmittable and acceptable. We see a fragmentation of audiences, who are now called consumers, and in no small measure journalism itself begins to

target these audiences thereby contributing to this decline of the gate keeping roles of institutions. And thirdly, I think that we are witnessing, in our times, the structural transformation of the public sphere. I want to say something about the concept of *prostor javnosti*, of the public sphere and briefly to define in the most abstract way possible what a public sphere is, and why it is important for democracy.

A public sphere, I think, is an imagined community, a virtual community. It is a type of relationship, a spatial relationship between two or more people who are usually connected by a certain means of communication (television, radio, satellite, fax, telephone). And in this space, there are controversies, non-violent controversies, about "who gets, what, when and why". That is, there are controversies within the public sphere about the distribution of goods and services and power. And this non-violent controversy within this virtual community I think is the essence of what a public sphere is.

Why is it important for a democracy? Because I think public spheres, in the sense that I am using the term, have the effect of denaturalising or de-sacralising power relationships. They are no longer seen to be god given. Whether the power relationships are within the household, within the local community, the workplace, or within the field of government or in the field of international relations, to the extent that the power relations in these fields become subject to controversies in the public sphere, they come to be seen as no longer natural, they come to be seen as contingent, as therefore changeable.

So, a public sphere is a vital medium of naming the unnamed or describing power relationships, of saying the unsayable as J.F. Leothard once put it. A public sphere is a space in which frauds are pointed out, in which people take sides. A public sphere is not just a space for the conservation of existing meanings. It is a space in which there are arguments that begin, in which there is a certain diffidence (as Umberto Eco put it) towards power relations; in which the world is shaken; in which the world is not allowed to fall asleep.

This is, as I understand it, the essence of a public sphere, and I want to say thirdly and finally something about the contemporary transformation of the public sphere.

Now, if you look back at the public service model as it crystallised, for example in Britain, Germany, France or in Japan, the idea was that public service television and radio would be the fora within which the public sphere of citizens debating policies would be maintained through time within a territorial state framework. I believe that this original or classical public service model is too simple, that it is coming to be obsolete. But I do not, and I want to emphasise that, I do not suppose that the public is withering away. I do not think we are living in times in which there is only a phantom public (Walter Lippman). I do not think that Jurgen Habermas is right when speaks about the refeudalisation of the public sphere. I do not think that Marshal McLuhan was right when he spoke about the numbness, the lack of feeling, the paralysis of citizens by the new media. And I do not think that, for example J. Baudrillard is right when he says we are suffering an epidemic of hyper-reality, that is thanks to all of this communication abundance citizens become mute. They become incapable of speaking and replaying to others; they become so to say, robotic.

I think all of these images are incorrect, or at least exaggerated. Because it seems to me that we are living in times, in this new galaxy of communications, in which

public spheres do not disappear. They indeed flourish, but not in the same form. I would say that for those who are going to craft a new media policy in Croatia it is imperative that you take in count this so called structural transformation of the public sphere.

Why do public spheres (plural) begin to flourish? Why is that they do not remain housed within territorial states? Why is that publics do not wither away?

I think that reasons are complicated and I can mention only of few of them here. Partly, within the actually existing democracies, there are countervailing and conflict producing institutions: political parties, parliaments elections. These have the effect of whipping up nonviolent controversis about power. The United States is going through one of these at this very moment.<sup>1</sup>

Partly, the reason is as well that citizens are not becoming Dodos. Citizenship is still alive and there is still healthy signs of what the classical Greeks called – *parhesia* the ability to say things openly. This culture of saying things openly in the European region is by no means dead.

And I want to emphasize that one of reasons for the flourishing of public spheres within the European region and elsewhere in our times is traceable to the new galaxy of communications media. The media itself encourages public controversies. This is true both for commercial and also for public service media. The logic is this. With the decline of gatekeepers, sources become increasingly powerful vis a vis journalists. For example, if I have a leak, if I have an information, which I want to leak to the media, I can go shopping; I can find the best outlet for the release of that story. Or if I'm protesting against genetically modified food, I will stage that event by making sure that the media I want are there. This is a relatively new development. But there is also, I think, within the new media outlets, a process of constantly competing with each other and I think the growth of what in America is called the blockbuster mentality. That is to say, to the extent that the field of media becomes swamped with communicative abundance, then particular media (television, radio, Internet, newspaper) begin to compete with each other for the big story that changes the whole media landscape. We are living in times in which blockbuster stories become more and more important. The blockbuster stories are to do with celebrity, scandal, sex and of course the downfall of powerful figures, whether they are O.J. Simpson, princess Diana, Monica-gate or Sloba who for a few days commanded world attention in his ignominious decline.

I want to end by saying something about the transformation of public spheres. My idea is that anything that resembles a unified public sphere is finished, over. That we are living in times in which there is a fragmentation of publics, and this fragmentation process it might be described as a kind of modularization of public spheres, can be seen in the development of three kinds of publics: small, medium sized and large. I want to say something about this process of fragmentation, which I think greatly complicates the model of public service broadcasting, and any public service broadcaster needs to take into account this process of fragmentation and modularization.

I want to distinguish between the micro publics, mezzo publics and macro public. Micro publics are those relatively small public spaces that appear for example within social movements that develop around a local community radio (for example your radio in Istria) where there are controversies about power among only dozens or hun-

dreds or thousands of people. And there are usually restricted to the sub-nation state level. Not always, some of them may appear on the World Wide Web.

Mezzo publics are the public spheres that typically develop at a level of territorial states or regions of states, for example in Catalonia. They are held together by newspapers like the New York Times, Le Monde, or the electronic media like BBC, RAI or the four American networks. These are public spheres in which hundreds of thousands and millions of people are witnesses to public controversies about power. And finally, obviously, there are macro publics. These were unanticipated by Lord Reif and other defenders of the public service model. These are public spheres that begin to develop across borders. They are public spheres in which many millions and indeed in which perhaps billions of witnesses watch and are fascinated by disputes about the power. These began with the Vietnam War. They continued in for example the Reagan-Gorbachov summits, and one can see this in the Tienanmen crisis and in the war for the Balkans. Here in the other words, is the development of publics across borders and this is made possible because of satellite, the World Wide Web, in short, because of this new galaxy of communications.

I know that there are many things to be said about these abstract ideas. But what I have suggested to you is first of all that the old principle of public service broadcasting is today in deep crisis and in some areas undoubtedly obsolete. Secondly, the principle of a public sphere remains historically important. It is an originally European ideal and we should not forget it. It is too precious to allow to slip away and to disappear. And thirdly I have suggested that any attempt to keep alive this principle of a public monitoring of power, whether of business or whether of government, or whether of NGO's themselves, has to take into account this process of structural transformation of public space that is going on in our times. Why is this important? Because it seems to me, if one reason has to be given for the importance of public service media, of the principle of *prostor javnosti*, then it is this. When there is a flourishing public space of controversies that is the best, the ultimately unmoveable way, of preventing the private ownership of power. I think this point was first made in the first systematic reflection upon the principle of the public sphere in Europe, Jacques Neckier, the Swiss banker in an essay *De la administration de finance* in 1784 pointed out that the importance of public, the importance of public opinion, the importance of public debate, is that it prevents corruption. It prevents the corruption of authority. He had in mind that this primarily was a problem at the level of state institutions, that point remains clear. But we are wiser. We see, if I may amend Neckier, that *opinion publique* is important for controlling corruption also at the level of civil society and also on the level of supra-national relations.

### **Bilješke:**

<sup>1</sup> The Bush/Gore presidential election final results. Op.ed.

**John Keane**

## **Mediji i javna sfera – europska ideja i ideal**

### **SAŽETAK:**

Sadašnji negativni trend javnih broadcasting servisa povezan je s transformacijom javne sfere koju pokreće nova komunikacijska galaksija. Tradicionalni argument nestašice neodrživ je u vremenu medijskog i informacijskog obilja, a javni mediji izgubili su svoj privilegirani položaj nositelja javne sfere. Transformacija javne sfere koja je vezana za obilje novih medija očituje se kroz fragmentaciju i preoblikovanje publike čije potrebe zadovoljavaju različiti tipovi medija. Lokalni i *community* mediji stvaraju virtualne prostore javnosti na mikro razini, nacionalni mediji omogućavaju stvaranje srednjeg nivoa publike, dok Internet i čitava komunikacijska galaksija omogućavaju nastanak makro publike na globalnoj razini. Iako koncept javnih medija ne funkcionira više u svom tradicionalnom smislu, koncept javne sfere ostaje jako važan za demokraciju.