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Crisis of Democracy, Political Communication and Habermasian Critical Theory: A Comment on Peter Dahlgren

For Frands Mortensen

Debating the state of democracy and the alleged contribution mass communication makes to either upholding or degrading republican virtues has been one of the standard endeavours of mass communication studies. The *locus classicus* is Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922), accompanied by *The Phantom Public* (1925), and the response they elicited from John Dewey (1954). A less known, even if equally heuristic case is the early Jürgen Habermas's (1962) diagnosis of the possibilities of socialist democracy in the post-war Federal Republic, and the scathing criticism it provoked in Niklas Luhmann (1970).¹ The parallel expansion of neo-liberalism and the demise of the Soviet Union, backed up by the emergence of internet, gave in many quarters rise to a renewed interest in the relation between the public sphere, civil society and the polity in Western liberal democracies. One of the most persistent representatives of this phase in English-language media research has been Peter Dahlgren.² During the 1990s and 2000s he has defended a civic-culture approach to tackling the problem of 'democratic deficit' and the media's potentials in making it up. In the following, I will assess Dahlgren's contribution in four steps: staging the problem; presenting Dahlgren's major premises and theoretical ideas; illustrating Dahlgren's theoretical position by contrasting it to some counter-cases; and suggesting another solution to the methodological goal underlying Dahlgren's project.

¹ I have dwelt in some detail on these preludes to the contemporary debates in Malmberg (2009).

² By stressing the geopolitics of language, I want to draw attention to Dahlgren's self-imposed limitation of 'Englishness', not uncommon in an age when university administrations urge scholars to "publish in English or perish", a policy adhered to vigorously by small countries like the Nordic ones (for details, see Ingwersen 2000; for the rationale at large, see Wæver 1998). In practice this is manifested in the fact that Dahlgren bypasses not only the rich and theoretically sophisticated German-language research on the public sphere, which he may not be aware of, but also pioneering Danish contributions of enduring quality overshadowed by the 'Anglo-Saxon turn' (see Mortensen & Møller 1976; Sørensen 1975). This conforms with the procedures adopted by major English-language publishers in the field, namely, that references to non-English sources be curtailed, if not completely dispensed with (cf. Alasuutari 2004, 595–599)

The Diagnosis of the Present, Crisis of Democracy and the State of Mass Media

During the 20th century, Western democracies with representative governments elected on the basis of more or less universal suffrage were assaulted from various directions during three major periods: between the world wars, from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, and in the 1990s. The first period witnessed the triumph of authoritarian regimes all over Continental Europe, the most fatally in Germany; the second led to the brink of civil war in France and, especially, Italy; and the third gave rise to a paradox: with the collapse of the European socialist bloc, the victory of democracy was paralleled with an alleged decay of democratic spirit. In consequence, the stability of democratic rule, a problem known to Aristotle and debated ever since in political philosophy, has been one of the crucial issues occupying periodically the minds of political scientists, including those media scholars concerned with the political implications of mass communication. The question is how the new circumstances of the turn of the 21st century have changed our problem situation. In order to provide a background for analysing Dahlgren's position, I will take up three themes in general diagnoses of the present (e.g., Hobsbawm 1994; Hirsch 2002; Ruby 1990) and consider their potential impact on mass media: the return of economic inequality, the crisis of representation in politics, and the increasing untransparency of cultural discourses.

The postwar economic boom – the “Thirty Glorious Years”, as the French call them – was cut off in the 1970s, sparking off what has been termed as post-Fordism, neo-liberalism or network capitalism. One of the major consequences of the new economic regime was a growing disparity between social classes or strata, in two complementary ways. First, as the new mode of production was leaning on highly qualified workforce in knowledge-based industries, those with less abilities were marginalised. What is more, economic reproduction now longer had any need for the output of the whole adult population, with poverty – or ‘surplus population’ outside of productive labour – returning as a social issue (Bauman 1987). Second, as higher education expanded considerably, the upper middle classes began to constitute a considerable segment, meaning that what once was a small cultural elite now consisted of a third of the population (Todd 2008). In this way the new economic realities of inequality gave rise to widening fractures and polarisation in the society.

It was the express function of the postwar welfare state to provide consensus by trying to keep economic inequality to a minimum. However, under the new economic regime, welfare

states, in an attempt to secure their finances, were transformed into competitive states. In liberalised capitalism, with the market as the driving force of the political society, states began to see themselves as business-like enterprises which had to wage economic war against those states being able to produce more cheaply. As a result, the core of politics consisted less of ruling by lawmaking and more of ruling by negotiating between different interests. This diminished the power of legislatures and increased that of the executive branch (administration) as well as of different advocacy groups (businesses, lobbies, those using media for manipulative purposes).³ In other words, democratic government was weakened to the advantage of less popular and more oligarchic rule.

The parallel change on the cultural plane, having its manifestation in postmodernist discourse, contributed to the sense of disorientation and malaise felt in the body politic. The philosophy of liberal democracy was an offspring of Enlightenment with its cultural foundations in a humanistic vision of man's cognitive, moral and aesthetic development. This is why language, media and communication – as a means of disclosing the world, of learning to sympathise with others, and of giving expression to one's self – were accorded a special place in cultural politics. In the conditions of late 20th century, with its neo-television and new computer media, there seemed to be, however, much more reason to resort to Counter-Enlightenment, elements of which postmodernists provided for the intellectual scene in general and media studies in particular. As a consequence, the idea of a well-informed citizenry, the corner-stone of popular sovereignty legitimising democratic practice, lost much, if not most of its content. If media, verbal and other, are, because of intrinsic deficiencies, incapable of describing more or less adequately what is happening in nature and society, there is no need for autonomous cognitive institutions such as science or journalism. What is needed are affective machines bypassing rational judgment and opening up spaces of feeling-based participation.⁴

In explaining the sense of 'democratic melancholy' (Bruckner 1990) prevailing over the 1990s and 2000s, one can point out economic, political and cultural factors, or any combination of them – in conjunction with social, technological, ecological and other possible determinants. In media and mass communication studies, the decisive question, however, concerns the role of mass media in eroding the working of democratic government and reducing citizens'

³ As to the United States, Morton Keller (2007) makes the convincing case that this change of political regimes took place already with Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. Adopting this line of interpretation would grant more coherence to 20th century politics, political communication included, than is the case in those versions of the 'structural transformation of the public sphere' thesis stressing the epochal meaning of the turn of the 21st century. As a comprehensive survey of the relations between democracy and media in the 20th century, combining perspectives on both *longue durée* and new directions, see Bertho Lavenir (2000).

readiness to support it even in hard times. One of the most pessimistic pictures has been drawn by Douglas Kellner (1990; 2005) in an alarmist manner.

According to Kellner, the turn-of-the-21st-century crisis of US democracy has been caused by a shift in the balance of power between major politically relevant institutions, making fair and free elections practically impossible. The mainstream media are responsible for this in two complementary ways. First, as a consequence of a ever tighter economic and political control, made possible by the deregulation policies of the 1980s, they have been transformed into blatant tools to advance corporate interests, both economic and political. This has assisted in producing a conservative hegemony, which has biased the media agenda. Second, the parallel rise to prominence of the new media culture of spectacle, centred around television and leaning on the fabrication of pseudo-events as well as publicity stunts, has further eroded the possibility of the mainstream media to serve the public interest. As a result, with the elections of 2000 and its aftermath, the United States faced the greatest crisis in the history of the Republic.

Dahlgren's Project: Second-Wave Cultural Studies Meets Habermasian Critical Theory

Dahlgren's contribution to debating the place of media in the crisis of democracy, spelled out in a stream of articles mostly between *Television and the Public Sphere* (1995) and *Media and Political Engagement* (2009)⁵, combines Cultural Studies with aspects of Habermas's version of Critical Theory. In order to make an interpretation of Dahlgren's output on the subject, I will first characterise his mix of Cultural Studies and Habermasian Critical Theory, then present briefly his ideas on late modernity as the foundation of our contemporary practical and theoretical horizon, and describe finally in some detail major elements of his argumentation.

Dahlgren shares with Critical Theory the basic premise that social and cultural theory should give us "normative guides to the good society" (Dahlgren 2004, 13). This is what Habermas early on described as the objective of combining the classical tradition of political philosophy with modern political science, including political sociology of the public sphere – the theoretical programme he has, with varied conceptual means, tried to pursue since the turn of the 1960s. In line with Habermas and in contrast to empiricist political (media) studies, Dahlgren

⁴ In Malmberg (1996), I have briefly analysed the 20th century development of film and television from a similar point of view, diagnosing the present audiovisual media society as a society of spectacle, interaction and entertainment.

⁵ The latter book mainly rehashes articles published earlier, with additions of minor importance as far as the main line of Dahlgren's argumentation is concerned; so I shall use the first formulations as my principal corpus. It is to be noted that Dahlgren recycles repeatedly the same ideas, transferring not infrequently whole passages verbatim from one article to another, than is necessitated by purely argumentative reasons. One might, critically, consider this as an

sticks to the normative import of concepts like ‘democracy and ‘public sphere’, stating, for example, that the public sphere has become “a focal point for our desire for the good society” (Dahlgren 1991, 1–2). Despite the common ethical ground, Dahlgren’s position diverges, however, from Habermasian Critical Theory as he sees in at least three significant respects, which brings him within range of Cultural Studies (as an overall presentation of Cultural Studies by himself, see Dahlgren 1997).

First, Dahlgren repeatedly admonishes Habermas for neglecting the cultural side of the public sphere. This makes, on Dahlgren’s reading, Habermas incapable both of understanding the function of media culture, with popular culture as its centre, as the most important interpretative framework or symbolic environment of the citizens, and of explaining why people bother at all to engage politically, given the adverse conditions of the ‘end of politics’. What is called for, hence, is a ‘cultural turn’ the tools of which are provided in the first hand by Cultural Studies. It is Cultural Studies that can fill both of the gaps in Habermas: it is at the level of a ‘mediatised’ social world built around a popular-cultural imaginary, and it can account for the political use of media in more concrete ways. This brings us to Dahlgren’s second shift of emphasis. Underlying Dahlgren’s theoretical idea is a strict separation between the analytical levels of social structure and social action, with the stress on the latter in the form of life-world or everyday life. This has to do with Dahlgren’s relationship with the traditions of Cultural Studies. Instead of the structural-sociological Cultural Studies of Stuart Hall and others, Dahlgren is mainly leaning on the ethnographic and popular-culturalist research on media reception. As a result, when dealing with politics and media, he has, unlike Hall (e.g., 1980), little to say about the functioning of the state in the implementation of democracy. Dahlgren’s antistatism is a methodological consequence of his privileging, alongside with post-1970s Cultural Studies, the experiential dimension of social subjects and communicative practices. In itself, this is not an inevitable step one has to take, as witnessed by the later Habermas’s dual theory of system and life-world (Habermas 1981) and his corresponding conception of the public sphere (Habermas 2008a). It is correlated more with Dahlgren’s theory of knowledge, which is my third point. Notwithstanding his adoption of the axiological discourse, Dahlgren accords neither theoretical research in general nor normative research in particular any central place in his methodology. This manifests itself in his exclusive underscoring of empirical research, whether in dealing with everyday communication between citizens (e.g., Dahlgren 2002, 16–19) or with the political use the young and adults alike have found for the internet (e.g., Dahlgren 2003, 162–168; Dahlgren &

Olsson 2007). It is one thing to make a distinction between theoretical and empirical research, both of which are of utmost relevance for Habermas's methodology, and another to substitute one for the other. In trying to escape from theoretical impasses of pre-1980s Cultural Studies, Dahlgren has, with the cultural turn, adopted an 'empirical turn', too.

There have been major both intellectual and social reasons for critical media scholars to turn their backs on earlier models such as the Frankfurt School. As a matter of fact, post-1970 Cultural Studies has been animated by a seething animosity against Critical Theory, especially its theory of culture industry. Because of his political intuitions, and because of the unsurpassable case of Habermas, Dahlgren has distanced himself from the mainstream of this kind of reasoning, trying to bridge the gap between political media research of the Habermasian type and politically informed studies of popular culture in Cultural Studies. As far as I can see, the change of perspectives has become necessary for Dahlgren in view of the major social upheavals of the late 20th century, to which post-structuralist or post-modernist theorising has more or less successfully responded. In order to provide a background for Dahlgren's more specific solutions to problems dealing with contemporary political media studies, I will briefly take up for our purpose the most relevant aspects of his diagnosis of the present.

Dahlgren is quite outspoken about the political difficulties facing the contemporary world. His work abounds in expressions like "we find ourselves in another kind of dark historical time [comparable to that the first generation of the Frankfurt School encountered]" (Dahlgren 1998, 99), "democracy has entered a troubled era" (Dahlgren 2004, 17) or "what we are faced with is a serious erosion of civic engagement" (Dahlgren 2005a, 323). Unlike biopoliticians like Giorgio Agamben (2001) under Foucault's and Deleuze's influence, Dahlgren does not, however, suggest that the "new historical juncture" (Dahlgren 2003, 164; Dahlgren & Gurevitch 2005, 384) which democracy has entered is based on a permanent state of emergency. As a dialectician of sorts, he rather seeks for a mediation between a purely negative and a purely positive evaluation of our chances to navigate successfully across the rough sea. Sociological sobriety (cf., e.g., Dahlgren 1996, 61) compels Dahlgren to go beyond both pessimism and optimism, and this existential undercurrent, backed up by a heavy dose of post-structuralist philosophising, informs his diagnosis of the present as late modernity. Our immediate interest here is to see how this diagnosis leads to issues concerned with mass media, public sphere and civic culture.

Late modernity, in Dahlgren's interpretation, is the phase in the evolution of the modern society when certainties of different kinds disintegrate. 'Contingency' is the code word for this state of affairs: there are now longer universal characteristics or general laws, just contextual combinations of features or events bound in time and place. That is, things no longer are what they

used to be in the hemisphere of high modernity with its analytically safe distinctions between self and non-self, reason and affect, or public and private. This reflexivity, or blurring of the boundaries, is Dahlgren's explanation for the alleged crisis of parliamentarism or representative government. Namely, as people's personal identities lose their fixity, the dividing line between public and private spheres becomes porous. As a result, private matters assume political significance, which generates identity politics based not on striving for the public interest as represented by the formal political bodies, but on giving expression to specific sociocultural communities and life-styles, for which the internet seems to be an ideal medium of communication. Extra-parliamentary movements did not, of course, first emerge in the 1980s and 1990s, but it is the instability of the liberal democracy of the turn of the 21st century which seems to make them of special importance for Dahlgren's argument. Another reason is provided by the new media landscape.

For Dahlgren, like Habermas, mass communication is one of the core constituents of modernity (see Dahlgren 1995, 7–8). Without it there would be neither democratic politics nor democratic culture. But also this Enlightenment presupposition becomes, under the conditions of late modern reflexivity, problematic. The new media age, brought forth first by the neo-television in the 1980s and then by the internet in the 1990s, undermines some of the key assumptions of Enlightenment, which Habermas (1962) analysed with the concept of the bourgeois public sphere. In fact, Dahlgren's exposition recapitulates pretty much of the crisis of the late bourgeois society (Habermas 1961, 50) or late capitalism (Habermas 1973) as diagnosed by Habermas during his Marxist phase. The core idea boils down to the suggestion that, when there no longer exists any firm distinction between the public and the private, the public sphere in general as well as political engagement in particular lose their anchoring in the extra-political sphere. As previously non-political matters assume political character, the reconstitution of the liberal public sphere or a new basis of democratic will-formation is called for. The one significant difference between young Habermas and Dahlgren resides in where they locate the centre of this late modern extra-parliamentary politics. In the early 1960s, Habermas (1962, 243–255) put his faith in extending democracy with help of the publics that were formed inside organisations in their relation to the state; these might, Habermas hoped, operate as the new substitute for the publics the rising bourgeoisie had given rise to with cafés and reading clubs, an option he was soon to drop maybe because Luhmann (1970, 3– 6) considered it as a definite dead end.⁶ Dahlgren's theoretical choice

⁶ Organisational democracy, *Mitbestimmung*, was one of the prominent ideas of the West German student movement; one might see the philosophy of some of its leaders, like Rudi Dutschke, as materialisation of early Habermas's idea of the reconstituted public sphere.

brings me to a closer look at his communication, media and democratic theories. I will explicate them in three steps, as three different specifications of the connection between democracy and (mass) communication.

(1) The major conceptual innovation that Dahlgren proposes for the study of political communication is the notion of civic culture. The concept plays no significant role in *Television and the Public Sphere* (1995), where ‘civil culture’ assumes its role in the theoretical framework, but it is introduced with vigour some five years later (Dahlgren 2000a, 2000b). It is with the concept of civic culture that Dahlgren tries to address theoretically the crisis of democracy by searching for the roots which make popular sovereignty possible. In a sense, Dahlgren equates democracy with civic culture, for it is civic culture which makes the democratic system possible (Dahlgren 2000a, 335); and in a similar vein he is ready to argue that without a healthy civic culture “democracy as a system has no future” (Dahlgren 2001a, 75). One might see this as a ‘Kantian’ solution: Dahlgren asks for the possibility of existence of democracy, and his answer is civic culture. The question is how this connection is made credible.

Dahlgren (e.g., 2000) defines civic culture as the normative and cultural resources of citizenship, political engagement included. In line with the ethnographic version of Cultural Studies, civic culture is then specified as a focus on civic agency or citizenship seen from the perspective of everyday life and action. Democracy is possible when and only when people see themselves as citizens in informal political contexts, which implies a democratic ethos anchored in daily routines and the ability to act in special ways on this basis. The reasons for acting are related to the self-image or identity people have of themselves. This gives rise, as mentioned, to the various kinds of identity – or life-style – politics the contemporary extra-parliamentary political scene is composed of. This is so because, as the personal or private has become political, there is a proliferation of possible political issues dispersed across the social body.⁷ Dahlgren summarises the several aspects of his concept of civic culture with a catalogue that originally has four (Dahlgren 2000a) but is then enlarged to include to six aspects or variables (Dahlgren 2007). The final version encompasses as the dimensions of civic culture: knowledge; values; trust and affinity; spaces; practices and skills; and identities. Of these, identities are the most important, while the others are “contributing reciprocally to shaping the conditions of its existence” (Dahlgren 2007, 63).

⁷ To support this philosophically, Dahlgren (2002; 2007) leans on Chantal Mouffe’s distinction between the political and politics, the former being ontologically more deep-seated in contrast to the latter which marks the field of formal politics. I will return to Mouffe and her Left Schmittian problematics later.

Communication, mass and interpersonal, is relevant for civic culture in all its dimensions, even if its relevance depends on the kind of media used and type of communication activated. Dahlgren has devoted special attention to two media, television and the internet, in assessing their potential as means of fostering civic culture. At the systemic level one can say that civic culture would not be possible without late modern media, because the latter as a whole constitute people's general symbolic environment. In a post-traditional or reflexive late modern society, by definition, the cultural resources of action are no longer provided by family, church or even voluntary associations, but by the ubiquitous media of communication. As a result, for Dahlgren, people tend to construct their identities on the basis of the material they get from the meanings circulated by media. What is more, politics as we know it would be deprived of its main avenue had it not at its disposal the public spaces provided by media. It is in this way that civic culture, as the source of political identity and as civic engagement, is linked up with communicative practices.

(2) To speak of communication or media as relevant for democracy, without at the same time making clear what kind of communication and which aspects of the media one has in mind, does not lead very far. The young Habermas sorted out two kinds of media (the novel and the newspaper) and two kinds of communicative practices (reading in the general sense and speaking) that the rising bourgeoisie resorted to in its emancipatory project.⁸ Later on Habermas has devoted only minimal attention to the cultural public sphere of literature, arts and religion, and this has resulted in the exclusive focus on the communicative paradigm of speaking to each other, that is, on discussion or conversation. Dahlgren adopts the later Habermas's intuition, which has been articulated as the theory of deliberative democracy (Habermas 1996; 2003), and turns it into a theory of radical democracy cast as civic republicanism (Dahlgren 2006; 2007). Communicatively this implies the idea that "democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other" (Dahlgren 2005b, 149). Then, if civic culture is the basis of democracy, talk is the basis of civic culture, especially in its strong form of discussions around which publics are formed. Or, people become democrats and sustain their loyalty to the democratic polity by engaging in certain kinds of speech acts.

Dahlgren's conception of civic republicanism, like the deliberative democracy of later Habermas, is predicated on the relations between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary forms of politics. Even if Dahlgren may be characterised as an antistatist in that he has no substantial or

⁸ Too hasty encounters with Habermas's *Strukturwandel* (1962), Dahlgren's included, have significantly missed the cultural emphasis of the book. The reception of Habermas in media research was more complicated and nuanced in the 1970s (cf. the superb analysis in Mortensen & Møller 1976, esp. 9–35).

well-defined place for the state in his conceptual scheme, he does not dismiss the formal political system per se as irrelevant. It is irrelevant as far as people's everyday media reception or political talk is concerned, because 'new politics' is not instrumental but expressive, or it is not interested in problems of distribution but in the struggle for recognition. The communicative aspect of the radical democracy of civic republicanism means that the core issue of extra-parliamentary politics resides in maximising the possibilities various disenfranchised groups have in bringing to public attention their viewpoints. Increasing democracy is increasing communicative transparency in this respect. Although this sounds proto-Habermasian, Dahlgren's final step, betraying his connection to Cultural Studies, distances him from limiting discussion to deliberation.

(3) Because the foundations of civic culture, for Dahlgren, are to be found in everyday life and its routines – that is, common sense – the forms of communication it requires must also be down to earth, or popular. The chain of presuppositions and implications in Dahlgren's argumentation would then look something like the following: in order to operate untarnished, democracy needs an adequate civic culture, which needs citizens communicating with each other in the popular mode. I will say a few words about how this excludes a strictly deliberative view of democracy, and how it accords a central place to popular public culture.

Deliberative democracy as generally understood (cf. also Bessette 1994) and Dahlgren's civic republicanism have in common the basic assumption that democracy is a form of government that seeks for the public good by means of discussion and reasoning. Dahlgren's conception differs from that of deliberative democracy in two central respects: he does not connect discussion to political decision-making, and he allows a much wider repertoire of discursive modes for democratically relevant talk. The first difference, which I will take up later, seems to be a logical consequence of his antistatism as defined above, while the second one is associated with his Counter-Enlightenment or postmodern inclinations. The a- and irrational undercurrents of communication, as explored by psychoanalysis and psychoanalytically inspired semiotics (like that of Julia Kristeva), are given a sympathetic treatment in *Television and the Public Sphere*. Even if Dahlgren, like Habermas during the 1970s, seems to have lost interest in psychoanalysis when going forward, the dichotomy between cognitive and affective (but mostly missing the third link in Kant's trio: volitive) has remained central to his thesis. It is the "rationalist bias" (Dahlgren 2005b, 156) of Habermas that has to be avoided, or complemented with an adequate consideration of those aspects of communication which carry meaning between the lines. But as deliberation in the procedural sense inevitably means making analytical distinctions on the basis of varying evidence and value commitments, the rational discourse must take precedence over the arational one. This is something, however, which Cultural Studies has long denied.

In fact, Dahlgren's distinction between the rational and arational has one of its conceptual predecessors in John Fiske's and John Hartley's *Reading Television* (1978, 117–121), where it takes the opposition, drawn from Basil Bernstein's sociolinguistics, between the elaborate code of middle-class talk and the restricted code of working-class talk. Introducing the popular mode into the inceptive Cultural Studies, Fiske and Hartley take up the lead and adopt the distinction to analysing television as a form of proletarian public sphere. Later on, when Cultural Studies dropped the class perspective, what was formerly considered as proletarian became hailed as the popular as such (see, e.g., Fiske 1987). It is no wonder that also Dahlgren (1995) uses television as exhibit one to prove that there is something fatally wrong with the alleged Habermasian, rationalist or formalist manner of conceptualising communication. Still, in defending popular media forms, Dahlgren, once again, is wary of not conceding too much to the populist drive of Cultural Studies. This balancing emphasis may even explain the striking shift of his interest, visible in the 2000s, from television to the internet.

Dahlgren had already during the 1980s defended an approach to television underscoring the non-informational aspects of the medium which require a more hermeneutic way of inquiry (see, e.g., Dahlgren 1985) – a line of research culminating in *Television and the Public Sphere*, his best-known work. In late modern conditions, it is television that the most closely approximates with the general symbolic environment, or the cultural resources at the disposal of everyday actors. This is why “democratic politics must inevitably walk at least in part with popular culture” (Dahlgren 2005a, 322), wherever it may lead us. Dahlgren's main interest in the internet does not, however, focus on the use of the net for infotainment, but for direct political engagement. The reason for this might be that the development of television, especially television journalism, in spite of the promising enlargement of its discursive means via popularisation, did not turn out to be what Dahlgren expected in the mid to late 1990s. Namely, in a couple of pieces towards the end of the millennium (Dahlgren 1998; 1999), he defended public-service television and urged European broadcasting companies to lend their ears to more innovative attempts at developing serious (popular) television journalism. On this interpretation, what ensued from the popular promise of television was not at the level of the political promises at the new historical juncture of liberal democracy. Popular democracy had to focus, instead of the semiotic democracy of television (Fiske 1987, 236–239), on the prospects of dialogical democracy in the web.

A Critique of Dahlgren

Peter Dahlgren's attempt to synthesise Critical Theory of Habermasian inflection with second-wave Cultural Studies is well-grounded, in both respects. Even if early Habermas, contrary to prevailing misunderstandings in contemporary English-language media studies, was well aware of the need for a comprehensive concept of public sphere covering its both political and cultural dimensions, he has never returned to this original intuition in any rigorous manner, only repeating ideas of the early 1960s (cf., especially, Habermas 1992, 399–467; 2008a). Given Habermas's post-Marxist theory of society, based on the duality between system and life-world as defined against communicative rationality, and his more recent theory of deliberative democracy, articulating the ideal communicative conditions that should obtain between system and life-world in a radically democratic polity, one may legitimately aspire for a more balanced relation between the political and cultural public spheres.⁹ To propose post-1970s Cultural Studies for this mediating role in media research goes by itself, especially if one shares Habermas's phenomenological emphasis on the actor's perspective. The task is then to show how the results of the new reception studies may shed light on, if not make inevitable, a conception of politics grounded on everyday activities like television watching. But the problem with the new Cultural Studies is that, by celebrating the emancipatory potential of popular culture, it tends to totally conflate the political and cultural public spheres – i.e., turn politics into cultural politics revolving around the issue of media representations (cf., e.g., McKee 2005). Political engagement needs, however, also other sources of information than commercial media output, and other forms of civic participation than consuming mediated messages.

Dahlgren's highly welcome project of trying to overcome imperfections underlying both Habermasian Critical Theory and 'postmodern' Cultural Studies is considerably weakened by a host of conceptual, theoretical and empirical factors. I will organise them around the three aspects with which I analysed his general framework: (1) the problem of civic culture, media culture included, and its relation to political action; (2) the radicality of Dahlgren's civic republicanism; and (3) the question of participation (talking) versus observation (reading, watching) in the communicative definition of the ideal democracy.

(1) The idea of political culture based on the education of civic virtues played a prominent role in Aristotle's conception of the stability of state forms in *Politics*, and it has been part of Western political thought ever since (for a succinct overview, see Almond 1989). It is, however, the postwar inquiry into civic cultures, inaugurated by Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba (1965), that gave rise to a still lively research tradition (as a good introduction, see Pickel &

⁹ This is accomplished by Jeffrey Alexander's new ambitious theory of civil society, which, from the angle adopted here, could be seen as an updated version of *Strukturwandel* (see Alexander 2006, 69–105).

Pickel 2006, 15–147). In order to fill the gap in both Habermasian Critical Theory and receptionist Cultural Studies, Dahlgren introduces civic-culture studies as a corrective. However, Dahlgren dismisses summarily the relevance of the tradition represented by Almond and Verba, accusing it of reductionism, ethnocentrism and psychologism (Dahlgren 2000a, 336; Dahlgren 2002, 19), which involves the risk of forcing himself to reinvent the wheel. In other words, there are many similarities between Dahlgren and the ‘traditional’ civic-culture studies that could have been of assistance to Dahlgren. I will briefly indicate how.

Almond and Verba’s (1965) seminal work, like many of the studies within the tradition (Dahlgren’s output makes no exception), was oriented by a sense of endangered democracy. The empirical data of the study were gathered amidst the Cold War in the late 1950s, when the political consolidation of formerly fascist West Germany and Italy was still incomplete, and the instability of France, culminating in the establishment of the Fifth Republic, was obvious.¹⁰ Almond and Verba’s not so implicit aim, hardly covered by the detachment empirical surveys tend to impose on the results, was to show that the Anglo-Saxon countries, and especially the United States, was the paradigm of democratic stability. The reason for this brings me to the conceptual solution I think Dahlgren should have considered more carefully.

Almond and Verba define the civic culture typical of stable democracies as a mix of three ideal types of political culture: parochial (in which citizens give no allegiance towards the political system); subject (in which citizens accept the polity but are subservient); and participant (in which citizens are active in their civic roles). Civic culture is a combination of parochial, subject and participant political cultures in that it allows the ideal citizen to possess the seemingly contradictory characteristics of passivity and activity: in his or her role as a citizen, one may – depending on the context – behave politically in an indifferent, submissive or opposing way, respectively. The most heuristic aspect of the definition here makes it clear why one of Dahlgren’s basic premises, that apparently passive people can in fact, given proper circumstances (e.g., Dahlgren 2000a, 311–312), show considerable interest in political engagement, is not an anomaly but the standard case in healthy democracies as defined by Almond and Verba.

The tradition of civic-culture studies, in and beyond Almond and Verba, casts light on the status of two further questions at the heart of Dahlgren’s conception: the expressive nature of new politics, and the explanatory force of the civic-culture paradigm. Of all the features that define the civic culture according to Dahlgren identity is the most important, so that people act politically

¹⁰ In their comparative study, Almond and Verba juxtapose civic cultures with different political traditions: Anglo-American (Britain, USA), Continental European (West Germany, Italy) and other (Mexico). In Almond (1956), there is a preliminary justification for this kind of classification.

on the basis of their self-definitions. Politics becomes then a form of giving expression to one's self, best exemplified for Dahlgren by new social movements. But there is the conceptual and empirical problem of how much political weight the expressive dimension of identity is able to carry. Almond and Verba thought that, for democracy to work, there must be a balance between the citizen's expressive and instrumental orientations, which was part of their philosophical indebtedness to Talcott Parsons or, more fundamentally, to Enlightenment humanism. One might say that the exclusive stress on political self-expression risks over-dramatising politics (it is concerned only with things having existential importance), while conversely relying only on instrumental considerations risks under-dramatising politics (it has to do only with the means but never with the goals). Having it both ways may even clarify why the crisis of democracy, which Dahlgren accepts as a fact, may be seen in a different light. Namely, if we make a distinction between the expressive, moral and instrumental levels of allegiance to the democratic polity, of which the first is concerned with the identification with democratic ideals in general, the second with the legitimacy of democracy as a political system, and the third with the satisfaction citizens feel as to the performance of a specific democratic state, a democracy may be in crisis at the third, but not at the other levels (cf. Pickel & Pickel 2006, 85–100).

The civic-culture approach emerged as a reaction against institutional and structural explanations of political behaviour, which required better ways of classifying existing political systems (Almond 1956). One could not remain at the level of laws and ethical norms, because formally similar political systems performed differently. Hence, the intermediary or mesolevel of the civic culture was introduced between the macrolevel of political institutions and the micro-level of actors (Pickel & Pickel 2006, 49–58). In this way individuals' political behaviour in different democratic countries could be explained as mediated by the content of the corresponding civic cultures. One of the standard objections raised to the civic-culture approach has been that it is illegitimate to conclude from the existence of culture as attitudes, norms and competences to manifest action (Pickel & Pickel 2006, 31–36). It is just this extrapolation that Dahlgren uses as his starting-point for arguing in favour of the civic-culture paradigm in the study of political communication. It is true that he backs his thesis up with empirical case studies and theoretical pondering, but he fails to demonstrate that civic culture is to be privileged to the institutional level as the main factor explaining the support Western democratic regimes – judged from the few references to singular democracies he makes, Dahlgren seems to have in mind especially the United States – still draw from their citizens. This issue can be approached indirectly by considering the meaning of mass media for political engagement; that is, if media are relevant for sustaining the civic culture, they must contribute to the mobilising of private persons to public participation.

The picture one can draw from empirical research is, however, ambivalent (as a comprehensive overview of German- and English-language studies of political communication, see Schulz 2008).

On the basis of empirical evidence, but presumably also because it flattered their national pride, Almond and Verba came to the conclusion that what contributed most to the stability of democracy was a civic culture compatible with a balanced modern – and middle-class – social life best exemplified in their survey by the USA. Almond and Verba did not, surprisingly, consider mass media as primary factors in the formation of civic culture, contrary to the disciplinary consensus in mass communication research. It was rather the connection between the family, voluntary associations and the work-place which, by developing civil courage, mutual trust and cooperative skills, nurtured the grassroots of political participation. In the study of political communication, Dahlgren included, it goes by itself that in contemporary Western democracies the mass media are a prime, if not *the* prime agent of political life at the formal level, but also at that of civil society. The media are the chief source of political information for people who, in the same way, learn how they should behave as citizens. As self-evident as this may sound as a description of late modern political socialisation, there exist factors that complicate the picture. Almond and Verba (1965, 136–167) already pointed out the discrepancy between the amount of political information and political participation: the motivation to act politically is sustained by other factors than those linked to the fact of being well-informed. The empirical evidence on how the media contribute to increasing or decreasing people's interest in politics seems to be, significantly, non-conclusive.

Schulz's (2008, 155–227) review refers to two trends the relevance of which is theoretically hard to combine in terms of media influence. On one hand, as also suggested by political sociology of the 20th century (Mann 1995), there has occurred depoliticisation of the young, who from the early 20th century radicalism to the upsurge of the '1968ers' belonged to the political avant-garde on the right and left. On the other, the interest in politics has increased, as new spheres of life have assumed political significance and as new media have emerged to facilitate political expression as well as group-formation. But if citizens' political participation is connected to their political interests, and if civic culture is the ground which affects both, one may legitimately ask whether the main burden of proof falls on media or other influences in explaining crisis of democracy. Comparing the three 'crisis periods' of the 20th century – the interwar decades, the turbulent years in the 1960s to 1970s, and the end of the millennium – in terms of political communication and its relation to political behaviour, extremist and conventional, might help shed some light on the explanatory dilemma (material for such a historical-comparative approach is provided by Bertho Lavenir 2000).

(2) Democracy is an exceptional form of government as testified by the fact that it was only after the 20th century antifascist and anticolonial struggles combined with the collapse of the state-socialist rule in Europe, that it achieved its present quasi-self-evident status. Yet, also the Soviet Union and other countries dominated by the communist parties considered themselves as socialist republics or people's democracies – that is, as radical democracies. The idea of radical democracy, supported by Dahlgren and other media activists leaning to the left, needs obviously some clarification. To gain more insight into the specificity as well as problems of Dahlgren's conception of civic republicanism, it is helpful to start once again from Habermas's (1962) original version of the public-sphere theory.

Habermas's conception of the bourgeois or liberal public sphere is based on a dialectic between differentiation and integration, which defines the bourgeois or liberal society as such. First, the new form of public sphere, based on autonomous individuals in their triple capacities (as human beings, as bourgeois private persons, and as citizens), becomes possible when the political society of the state is differentiated from the non-political one (called simply 'society'). The non-political society of private relations, standing on the ground of the family (consisting of the intimate sphere) and of civil society (defined by contractual relations on the basis of private property), serves as the guarantor of individual self-determination, communicative competences included. It is only with the help of this social infrastructure that people can assume their role as citizens. But this, second, calls for an integrative mechanism in the form of public communication, or communication among private persons gathered as a public. In this way the public sphere, previously without any links to popular engagement, becomes the major means by which people outside of the state machine can not only express their sentiments and opinions, but ideally also control and direct the course of public policy. In sum, the bourgeois society is based on political (state) and non-political (family, civil society) spheres, and these are mediated by the sphere of the public, which is in itself both political and non-political (cultural), otherwise it could not be a mediator.

The next step of the dialectic in Habermas's analysis, the decline of the bourgeois model of differentiation and integration, or the structural transformation of the public sphere, paves way for the introduction of Habermas's early version of radical or late bourgeois democracy. It is predicated on two premises which bring us closer to contemporary debates. First, as the differentiation of state and society, in the conditions of social (*Sozialstaat*) or welfare state, dissolves, social issues assume political character and public policy intervenes in private matters. That is, in a postmodern way of speaking, a general blurring of distinctions follows, which means considerable expansion of the range of potentially political issues. Second, as a result of the dedifferentiation described, the bourgeois public, the carrier of the liberal public sphere, becomes disintegrated. Its

place is taken by the social agents capable of integrating the welfare state, the publics formed within social organisations and having their rights guaranteed by the new constitutional statutes of the social state, as the rights of the bourgeois public sphere had been guaranteed by the documents of the great bourgeois revolutions (such as the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, even if, for lack of comparability with European developments, the young Habermas excludes the case of the United States from his historical panorama).

On this reading, radical democracy implies two kinds of critique of the liberal model of representative government. First, private concerns should be more easily transformed, via the mass media, into public issues, and, second, civil-society actors should have a greater say in influencing formal policy. These are just the phenomena also Dahlgren thinks explain the rise of so-called new politics: life-style or identity problems generating new social movements. The question is how both radical and feasible Dahlgren's civic republicanism really is. I will assess this by commenting his relation to Mouffe and by comparing his model with the latest formulation of Habermas's public-sphere theory.

Dahlgren's explanation for the potential political meaning of social life is ontological rather than institutional. To demonstrate that the blurring of social concerns and political issues does not emerge as a consequence of the development of modern society, but resides in the very core of the human condition, Dahlgren resorts to the political philosophy of Chantal Mouffe, taking up her distinction between antagonistic and agonistic political relations (Dahlgren 2002, 12–13; 2007, 61–62). The distinction is based on a reading of Carl Schmitt, once Adolf Hitler's advisor on constitutional law, whose emergence as an intellectual authority on the radical left has caused some controversy (see Monod 2006).¹¹ Mouffe proposes that we counter liberal principles of politics, bent on suppressing cleavages in people's political orientations, with a Schmittian emphasis on conflictuality as the basis of all politics (cf. Mouffe 1997; 1999; 2005). This gives rise to Mouffe's distinction between the political and politics, with the political (the ontological) preceding any singular instances of politics (the ontic). Liberal democracy of the radical sort becomes possible for Mouffe, and for Dahlgren, when it is further assumed that the partners in any conflict treat each others as adversaries, not as enemies. It is by this way that the Schmittian antagonism, the model of which seems to be Hegel's view of states as inherently belligerent in their mutual relations (cf. Schmitt 1930), can be mediated with liberal civility defined as agonistic pluralism. One wonders whether this amounts to anything else but the "limited polarisation" (Parsons) also proto-liberals

¹¹ As a matter of fact, it is well-known that Schmitt was also one of early Habermas's sources of inspiration in his critique of the postwar parliamentarism in the Federal Republic (see for details, e.g., Jäger 1973); Habermas himself (2009, 12–15) admits as much.

can whole-heartedly ascribe to (cf. Almond & Verba 1965, 358). Anyway, the focus here is on the specificity of Dahlgren's civic republicanism in terms of radical democracy and public sphere.

Radical liberal democracy, which excludes the democratisation of the economy, starts from two conditions made possible by late modernity: the extension of politics to cover previously non-political issues, and the increasing pressure the civil society is supposed to exert on the state. Because of his concept of politics, Dahlgren is mainly interested in elaborating consequences of the former phenomenon, while Habermas's (2008a)¹² idea of deliberative democracy is analysis of the mechanisms of the latter option. This is also a way of sorting out limits of Dahlgren's position, which I will attempt by a three-step comparison between his and Habermas's model of political communication.

The basic problem of democracy, to which conservatives, liberals and radicals have a different answer, resides in the contradictory requirements it should meet (cf. Preuss 1989). On one hand, democracy is supposed to mean popular sovereignty, the rule of the people, but, on the other, it should result in policies speaking out the best interests of the people – i.e., be rational or acceptable in the long run. That there can be a contradiction between these purposes is evident. Decisions made on the basis of the most active participation of the citizenry can lead to disastrous consequences, which means that they have been unwise and uncorrelated with the long-standing interests of the people; and decisions indicating high quality of statecraft, and serving undoubtedly well the general welfare, can be made by a small group of politicians, or maybe just by one¹³. Dahlgren differs from Habermas in that he, like most of the Cultural Studies tradition, pays but scant attention to the problem of rationality. Because politics is overwhelmingly an issue of finding outlets for the expression of one's identity, a good democracy is where every single group can follow its own generally recognised standards while sticking to a minimum of mutual respect – at whatever cost to the functioning of the society at large, both immediately and in the long run. From this basic solution follow Dahlgren's and Habermas's different views on democratic communication.

Dahlgren's turn from television to the internet as the main focus of his scholarly interests was accompanied by a shift of perspectives from an institutionally informed conception, to be seen in *Television and the Public Sphere*, his most balanced work, to one concentrating on everyday actors mainly. That is, in drawing attention to the significance everyday talk has for the

¹² This is the considerably enlarged German-language version of the keynote speech, published in *Communication Theory*, Habermas gave at an ICA conference in Dresden in 2006. Because of its many additions, e.g., a note on the nature of a possible Europe-wide public sphere, it can be considered as Habermas's most comprehensive analysis of the subject since *Strukturwandel*.

¹³ This is Schmitt's rationale for defending dictatorship as a form of democracy.

proper functioning of democracy, he is not interested in how this local talk among citizens might have influence outside of a specific context (cf., e.g., Dahlgren 2002; 2006). A healthy democracy, for Dahlgren, consists of people conversing with each other on matters which could turn out to have political implications, irrespective of whether they really have or not. For, to exert influence on the society at large, everyday interpersonal communication has to be transformed into a voice to be heard elsewhere, too. The medium of this, public opinion, was early Habermas's main problem in *Strukturwandel* – the title of the Italian translation of the book is *Storia e critica dell'opinione pubblica* – and it is still at the core of his concept of the public sphere. The function of mass communication, in Habermas's view, is not only to make the communicatively limited talk of everyday life be heard more widely, but also to compress it into considered (*reflektierte*) public opinions, which approximate the will of the people at the life-world level. Habermas's specific word for this function is 'filtering': it is only by filtering, that is, sorting out opinions representing universally acceptable interests from those giving expression to particular ones only, or making the rational outcome of everyday talk possible, that the two levels of civic communication, interpersonal and mass, can be combined in a late-modern complex society. By leaving the connection unspecified, Dahlgren, for his part, fails to show how radical democracy could work effectively in the contemporary world. Comparing, finally, Habermas's defence of old mass media (cf. also Habermas 2008b) and Dahlgren's emphasis on the new ones rounds up my reservations about Dahlgren's model in this issue.

In order to show that the mass media like the newspaper can operate as a filtering device Habermas has to speak for the aspects of mass communication those enthusing over so-called interactive media consider as its fatal defects: namely, that mass communication is abstract and asymmetrical. In other words, the way the old mass media operate is by abstracting from the kind of interpersonal closeness peculiar to interpersonal communication, and by keeping the contact flowing into one direction only, from the speaker to the listener – and, as far as democracy in a complex society is concerned, there is in principle nothing problematic about this arrangement. In his latest statement on the public sphere, preceded and anticipated by what he said in the early 1990s (Habermas 1992, 435–467), Habermas explicitly distances his idea of public communication from the model of face-to-face interaction, an accusation his earlier version has aroused in many quarters. It is exactly because mass communication and interpersonal communication are not conflated, that the former can bring some coherence to the immense amount of talk and communicative interaction at the level of everyday life – that is, serve as a social space for formulating publicly relevant opinions. Whether mass media are capable of performing this function in practice, is an empirical question, depending, especially, on the amount of power over

which differently positioned social actors can wield in their relations with the media. It is the role of critical media research, for Habermas, to observe whether the requirements of public opinion-formation are properly met.

As far as the political public sphere is concerned, Habermas (2008a, 161–163) does not consider the web as a substitute for the quality media of the old type; but Dahlgren does, though with some reservations. This seems to be logical, given Dahlgren's main interests. Namely, as Dahlgren equates democracy with its possibility at the level of the civic culture centering on self-images, values and competences, he focuses on the internet as a resource of political engagement, as in the case of the young (Dahlgren & Olsson 2007). It is, however, one thing to demonstrate that citizens can find the web helpful for gathering information or making contact with like-minded partners, and another to show that it can operate as an abstracting and generalising medium capable of filtering considered public opinions out of the infinite mass of messages not only in the new media (websites, blogs, and the like) but also in the old ones. But unless there are at the disposal of the political decision-making process media of the latter sort, there is no way, outside of the formal election process, of arriving at what the people want and whether their wants accord with the public good. The upshot seems to be a legacy handed down to Dahlgren by the second-wave Cultural Studies, with its celebration of subcultures and dismissal of formal politics as elitist. The impression is strengthened by the fact that, even if Dahlgren does now and then cursorily allude to the importance of legislative bodies and the executive branch (Dahlgren 2000a, 335; 2001b, 40; 2003, 164; 2005a, 325), his conduct of political-communication research is oriented towards the extra-parliamentary context only. More specifically, of the four possible types of political communication sorted out by Schudson (1989, 152), Dahlgren focuses almost exclusively on one, on the way the governed communicate among themselves.

(3) What if democracy does not “reside, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other” (Dahlgren 2005b), or if democracy resides in communication, though not primarily in speaking but in listening? The controversy between Lippmann and Dewey in the 1920s, now universally considered as a paradigmatic case in the field, hinged on this issue, even if Dewey's standpoint was not as opposite to that of Lippmann as is generally accepted (for two interpretations, see Malmberg 2009; Schudson 2008). Anyway, Lippmann (1925) defended the idea that, for democracy to operate properly, the citizens as publics must assume the viewpoint of observers and spectators, being outside of the political stage in a position to assess the performance of the political actors. Dahlgren does not consider adequately this option, especially when he moves from television to the internet. Habermas's (2008a) framework, basically a variant of the same republican ethos “with a predilection for continuous discourse” (Heller 1985, 24) that informs Dahlgren, is in

this sense more comprehensive, reserving a not insignificant place for the listening subject. This has to do with the idea of deliberative communication.

Dahlgren dismisses the deliberative idea of discussion as too rationalist and restrictive. He is right in the description but not necessarily in the evaluation. In fact, there is a tension not easily dissolved in Dahlgren's argumentation. On the one hand, he correctly emphasises the cognitive aspects of political communication such as news, not accepting the disregard for factual objectivity popular in Cultural Studies circles. One cannot act responsibly without knowing what is going on in the outer world. However, on the other hand, when dealing with everyday talk, the nucleus of his idea of how citizenship is nurtured, Dahlgren remains silent about the cognitive aspect, as if identities were just agglomerations of subject positions on this and that moral-emotive issue. It is true that he has a place for knowledge as a source of civic culture and, hence, of political engagement. But he does not consider the acquisition of knowledge, the art of reading, watching and listening, at the same level as its use in talking. This, however, is the crux of Lippmann's conception, and it is included in the Habermasian model, too.

To have a realist theory of political life, an objective one can easily share with Dahlgren (see, e.g., Dahlgren 1996, 61; 2001b, 48), the talkative aspect of citizenship has to be combined with the spectatorial one, without apriorically privileging the one to the other. This is the beauty of soft versions of deliberative democracy, giving leeway for moving from communicative interaction with others to that with texts (cf. Bessette 1994, 49). It seems that Dahlgren, putting too much theoretical weight on the specificity of the internet, ignores the dialectic of two functions of communication: to open ourselves, via speech, to others, and to disclose the world, via cultural texts, to ourselves. The latter moment of the dialectic may include cognitive, moral and aesthetic aspects. It is in accordance with the Enlightenment tradition to see political education, or the formation of the collective polity as well as of the individual political subject, to be embedded in cognitive, moral and aesthetic relations with the social and natural world. This is why the cultural public sphere, with an emphasis on the spectatorial moment of the dialectic, figured so prominently in Habermas's theory before the stress on deliberation. The young Habermas did not, however, follow those in the earlier Frankfurt School like Herbert Marcuse, who stuck to the model of Schiller's aesthetic education, conceptualising politics in an aesthetic language; in Schiller's memorable words, "it is through beauty that one enters the realm of freedom". Rather, Habermas subordinated the aesthetic to the political, and the political to the communicative, ending up with a model which, as was to be expected, has aroused criticism both of insensitivity to the affective undercurrents of politics and of reducing politics to consensus-seeking by discourse. Dahlgren accepts both of these lines of critique, using Cultural Studies and Mouffe as his strongest counter-

arguments. Unfortunately, he has missed the other side of the Enlightenment dialectic, the receptive citizen whose autonomy grows when he fills himself with the elements of truth, moral integrity and beats the social and natural worlds put at his disposal.

Conclusion: For a 'Dialectical Turn' in Critical Mass Communication Research

One could argue, like Klaus Bruhn Jensen (1995, 58), that Habermas' *Strukturwandel* "remains the best framework for a comprehensive analysis of culture and communication in modern Western societies" – provided we keep to the general framework of the work rather than to all the specific solutions involved. One could also argue that Cultural Studies is an approach commanding attention, not only because of its impressive academic success story, but also because of its continuities with critical traditions in mass communication studies. Narrowing the gap between Critical Studies, Habermasian but also other, and Cultural Studies, old or new, seems then to be well-grounded. It is a credit to Peter Dahlgren that he has provided us with an example how this ecumenic interest could be served between mutually hostile critical camps. That he has not lived up to all reasonable expectations may be less important than the effort to survey unexplored terrain and map out courses for others to pursue in greater detail. As a conclusion, I would like to speculate, on the basis of Habermas and Critical Theory, about the theoretical and methodological principles needed in keeping this project going.

One of the standard misunderstandings about Critical Theory, emerging repeatedly when empiricist notions of research occupy the centre stage, concerns the speculative nature of its generalisations and the substitution of the normative for the empirical. Not that these accusations are void of truth-content, but they mostly miss the point or are not as compelling as they are thought to be. Take the practice, widely shared by those doing qualitative audience research within the Cultural Studies, of dismissing Horkheimer's and Adorno's theory of the culture industry because it has no place for active receivers. It may be so, but it is also that Horkheimer and Adorno's conception is a theory of antiliberal capitalism as a social system, of which the cultural-industrial subsystem forms a part. It might be better to start the critique, not with the phenomenological level of individual communicative actors, but with the non-phenomenological level of the systemic characteristics forced on the culture industry, mass media included, by the advance of commodity production in the 20th (for the distinction between the levels, see, e.g., Schanz 1977). It may be that the critique would end up with the same negative conclusion; but it would, nevertheless, take

seriously the problem Horkheimer and Adorno are addressing, and not replace it by the one more convenient to the critics.

The problem Habermas set himself at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s, especially with *Strukturwandel*, was how to conceive of a modern conception of critical social science that could perform the same function the classic discourse of politics had done from antiquity to early modernity. What was needed was a comprehensive and multidisciplinary perspective the general principles of which had been elaborated by the first generation of Critical Theory. In studying public communication, exemplified by the nature and evolution of the bourgeois public sphere, this called for, according to Habermas, a combination of disciplines like: political philosophy, political sociology (both comparative and historical), capitalism theory, social history (of the family, especially), literary history and theory of the novel, history and theory of mass communication (adopting, but also going beyond, Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), public-opinion research – and, last but not least, the grand vision of the modern society as a unity in difference, based on a Marxist reading of Kant and Hegel. That many a voice in the media studies, immersed in empiricist presumptions of what qualifies as good scholarship, has found this perplexing, is understandable. After the 1970s, Habermas's example has not been followed as often as the intellectual rigour of his early methodology would have made one expect. What is more, Habermas himself dropped the study of public sphere for some 30 years, to return to the theme sporadically at the turn of the 1990s (Habermas 1989; 1990; 1992, 435–467). Now the aim was less to develop, in the spirit of the early Frankfurt School, a sociologically and historically informed as well as a comprehensive methodology than to reduce it, in inquiring into deliberative democracy, to the basic issue of how to connect normative and empirical research to each other.

Early on, Cultural Studies oriented towards a reversal of the Habermasian problematic by denying the emancipatory potential of middle-class codes of serious and not so serious communication in the fields of everyday interaction as well as of art and entertainment. It was argued, from the late 1970s on¹⁴, that such principles of speaking to each other were a hindrance to real social liberation, which called for the emancipation of communicative modes, especially those used in everyday informal contexts and in the tradition of music halls. In consequence, mainstream Cultural Studies scholars have whole-heartedly endorsed the tabloidisation of media, audiovisual and print (from Fiske 1992 to McKee 2005). All this has had an enormous impact on the kind of human science that is called for in exploring the new media-landscape. The dialectical project of Hall, inspired by the methodological introduction in Marx's *Grundrisse*, explicated in the mid-

¹⁴ Raymond Williams saw the singular uniqueness of the working-class, best characterising its sort of popular culture, in the organisations it had produced, not primarily in its modes of plebeian discourse.

1970s and used as a basis for his best-known piece on encoding and decoding, of which characteristically only the notion of active reception stayed alive in the post-1970s Cultural Studies, was substituted for the analytical project paying attention to only one only moment, especially that of reception, at a time.¹⁵ What ensued was the revival of the ethnographic approach, an old British specialty, and the study of small and minority collectives, such as fans and lesbians, harking back to earlier community and subcultural studies known from American sociology.

Peter Dahlgren's project can be seen against this background, reminding those in the Culture Studies camp of the greater picture and relevant methodologies they are in the risk of suppressing (quite explicitly stated in Dahlgren 1997, 58–60), and those in Critical Theory following Habermas of the need of untying connections to Enlightenment criteria of rationality and communicative competence. The introduction of a focus on civic culture as an explanatory level may be seen to satisfy both aims, even insufficiently. On the one hand, while the approach, with its emphasis on culture as an independent variable and with its empirical thrust, opens later Cultural Studies up to take issue with the political public domain, not only the cultural one. On the other hand, underscoring the embeddedness of political engagement in civic culture, a theme close to Habermas, even if never explicated extensively (Habermas 1973 is the most important source, taking up, among others, the Almond and Verba classic), may increase dialogue in political-communication studies between various republican critiques of neo-liberalist tendencies. What is missing, though, in his *œuvre*, as I have tried to argue in some detail, should make Dahlgren still more sensitive to the sense of multivalent critical methodology so memorably captured by Habermas, especially in his classic on the public sphere.

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¹⁵ Contemporaneously with Hall, Frands Mortensen (1977a;1977b) elaborated on an interesting methodological conception of multi-disciplinary mass communication studies. What makes his case more compelling, I think, is that Mortensen draws explicitly on public-sphere theory, which allows for a mediation, so glaringly absent from post-Hallian receptionist Cultural Studies, between the micro level of life-world actors and the macro one of social totality.

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