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The Utopia of Mass Media: Towards Public-generated Media

Santrauka. *Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama šiuolaikinės žiniasklaidos priklausomybė nuo politikos ir kapitalo, siekiama išsiaiškinti, ar ir kiek žiniasklaida plačiąja prasme ir, konkrečiai, visuomeninis transliuotojas yra vieši. Pagrindinis tyrimo dalykas – individualių siekių ir viešumo santykis. Drauge aiškinamasi, ar ir kaip visa tai padeda nušviesti viešojo transliuotojo gebėjimą arba negebėjimą sužadinti visuomeninį aktyvumą, ypač tada, kai kalbama apie platesnes už nacionalines transliavimo formas. Straipsnyje pasitelkiamas Slovėnijos visuomeninio transliuotojo pavyzdys kaip modelis, kuriuo remiantis tiriamas visuomeninis transliuotojas kaip struktūra, panaudojama nacionalinės valstybės ekonominių ir politinių interesų vardan. Straipsnyje aktualizuojamos visuomeninio transliuotojo problemos, ypač nesugebėjimas pritraukti išsklaidytų visuomenės sluoksnių, besiformuojančių už nacionalinės valstybės sienų, apibrėžtų tapatumo ribų ir nacionalinių ryšių lauko. Pateikiami argumentai, įvardijantys, kodėl šiuolaikinėse diskusijose apie viešumo potencialą žiniasklaidoje reikia atsižvelgti į viešumo apraiškas ne tik pačioje žiniasklaidoje, bet ir už jos ribų, pasitelkiant „visuomenės kuriamos žiniasklaidos" galimybes.*

Keywords: *public broadcasting, public, public-generated media.*

Raktiniai žodžiai: *visuomeninis transliuotojas, viešumas, visuomenės kuriama žiniasklaida.*

1. Introduction

In this article I look into the dependence of the mass media on politics and capital, taking public (service) media as an example to illustrate my point. I try to determine how much of the public, if any, is present in public media. I am interested in the public as a phenomenon involving the aspirations of individuals, which I consider against the background of public (service) media and their capacity (or incapacity) to absorb active engagement on the part of individuals that make up the public. Taking the example of the public service broadcaster Radiotelevizija Slovenia (Radio Television Slovenia, RTV), I analyze the constraints imposed on public (service) media by limitations and restrictions emanating from nation-state policies. I further thematize dimensions of the dependence of the public media model on the economic framework and draw attention to the reactivation of the public through the activity of what I name "public-generated media".

Several media studies have defended the thesis that the trends such as the liberalization

of the market and the commercialization and concentration of ownership have relocated media communication, subjecting it to market laws and that these trends have increased media dependence on everyday politics by removing communication from the public or by relocating communication political and economic structures. Therefore, pursuing similar arguments nowadays produces no radical new insights in this area. This said it is worthwhile adding that debates on media policies usually circumvent this subject rather than focus on it, which is not an unimportant fact in itself. Similarly, it has been thematized on many occasions that the mass media, depending on the policies of nation-states and despite their legal (de)regulating measures (or because of them), have drifted away from the public with the tendency to transform citizens into recipients or consumers.

In this text I raise the question of whether the public, understood as a phenomenon with its own activation potential, is conceivable at all in the context of the present day mass media, either public or commercial. I start from the thesis that the public has emancipatory potential which, when considered in the media context, coincides with the idea about the "public-generated media" which are not, as I will show, "public media." As a matter of fact, viewed from the perspective of the influence of economic and political factors, public media can even be thematized as antithetical to the phenomenon of the public.

In the 1930s, Dewey (1927/1984) linked the "commodification of communication" to the "eclipse of the public." This thesis was actualized decades later by Habermas (1962/1989) through his criticism of the "drying up of the public" as a consequence of the societalization of the media, increased political influence and booming consumer culture. Sennett (1977/1992) proposed a similar argument advancing a thesis about the "fall of public man."

Recent analyses of the public that draw on the critique of mass media society continue to rely on the theses dating from the 1960s about the "decline of the public sphere," "entrapment of the public" (Mayhew 1997), and "the decline and fall of public service broadcasting" (Tracey 1989). These texts critically thematize the corporative and apolitical colonization that produces a public confined within a media system governed by the principles of economic profitability and political efficiency. Viewed as a critique of the media in the era of neo-liberalism, these studies are undoubtedly important and cannot be brushed aside on the grounds that they have become mired in a total critique and normative ideals. However, more recent studies have been less preoccupied with criticizing the societalization of the public and the decline of its potential, and have increasingly focused on the treatment of the public as a phenomenon of citizenship (Bohman 1999; Fraser 2005). Although they still consider the trends towards depoliticization, they also ponder over the potential of alternative conceptualizations.

2. Public-generated Media

During the 18th and the 19th centuries, newspapers were originally conceptualized as a public space for the publishing of citizens'

opinions and reasoning, meaning that they represented a supplemental space for the debates held within public and private spheres. During this specific period of history, the media indeed possessed the potential to engage the public, but this lasted only a "split second" (Habermas 1962/1989; 95). With the arrival of the print media, media reporting became established as the only legitimate form for debates and related interpretations.

The sociological tradition, with its functionalist orientation, would explain this shift by stressing the necessity of social development, where the media must play their "social function" of gatekeepers, in such a way that they select from the multitude of information and present it to the people in an efficient way. The logic of parliamentarianism established the ideal of representation of people, and the media became established as a mediator for representation. According to Arendt, the boom in mass society and mass media brought to an end the thematization of citizens' activity and began to promote the idea of the people as a homogeneous group. The notion of the active public began to disappear, with the term active used here in the sense of debate, activity, the publishing of opinions, the passing of judgments, and not in the sense of professional representation of the people (Arendt 1958).

I would like to point out that the principle of freedom to publish opinions, which took hold in the print media for a short period of time, should not itself be absolutised. In western societies, access to the media has always been predicated on possession, which is the privilege of well-off, educated white people. On the other hand, the principle of possession and related public reasoning were reinforced through the denial of these capacities in other groups, for example, women, foreigners, children and so on. Nevertheless, the idea underlying the early stages of print media development was to enable the formation, expression and publishing of opinions, with the media seen as forums of activity. This role is different from that which the media assumed later as a watchdog on government. Rather than asserting their original role with regard to citizens as co-creators of media communication, the watchdog role legitimized the media as a corrective of government.

Consequently, the mass production of the media enabled by the industrial revolution turned freedom of the press into corporative freedom, which stands in contrast to individual freedom to act publicly and publish opinions. Media debates generated by citizens functioning as the public were taken over by the media functioning as corporative systems of representation, and by editors and journalists as professional content creators: freedom of the press was transformed from freedom to print into freedom for the print (media) (Splichal 2005: 29) and citizens' freedom into corporate freedom.

With the media gaining ground as a means of defining societal norms, the idea of newspapers as "readers' forums" or "spaces of open dialogue" that transcend the instrumentalized function of information provision and entertainment and enable exchange of opinions among readers, editors and writers was used to a lesser degree (Goodman 1994; 174). Consequently, the subsequent development

of the media adhered less and less to the concept of forum as a space for the exchange and confrontation of opinions and implementation of various practices for articulating topical issues. It was not only the watchdog role that contributed to the increased apoliticality of the media, but also increasingly the consumer-oriented attitude towards the audience, which the media adopted under the influence of Smith's economism of the 18th century.

The media as a public sphere and as a space for and principle of opinion exchange, were turning into instruments for the furthering of interests of political and economic governmental structures; political parties, national institutions and interest groups used the media to present themselves to the public, which acquired the meaning of the "people" (Habermas 1962/1989) seen as a homogeneous national body.

As Habermas established decades ago, the concept of the public as the people reinforced the naturalness of representing political and economic elites in the media, which today present themselves not so much to the audience as to themselves, that is to say, to their political opponents and economic competitors, rather than to citizens as the public (Davis 2003). The propaganda practices used in PR strategies and adopted by the media, the practice of publishing press releases and a drift away from investigative journalism, changed not only the media but also the public. The latter became the recipient and the buyer of press releases collected and mediated using the techniques of media management.

The idea about the public-generated media, according to which individuals should publish their opinions instead of journalists doing so on their behalf, can be traced in Dewey's project *Thought News*. Public oriented media, as conceptualized by Dewey, are not public media, because they are not media *for* the public. The public is not separate from them in the way a subscriber is separate from a television or radio program, or a target reader or consumer from a newspaper. The utopian potential inherent in public-generated media stems from the public, understood as a public space in which citizens express their own opinions instead of their representatives doing so on the citizens' behalf. Public-generated media do not seek legitimacy in representation, because they are not based on a representative system; neither are they based on a system of addressees because, if we follow Dewey, these are not audience-created media. Nor do they rely on the idea of possession, meaning that they are not public media or media *from* the public.

Public-generated media, in the sense of a public space for activity, create the public, which in turn creates the media through its activity, i.e. by publishing citizens' opinions. This type of public-generated media, which first appeared centuries ago in the form of leaflets, theater performances or pamphlets, is created by individual citizens acting in their own names; an action which distinguishes them from the representative journalism of the mass media.

Today we frequently encounter the interpretation that the public is the owner of the public media; the modern "public" therefore owns the public media, and this trait sets it apart from Dewey's public. The modern

public is not composed of citizens who co-create a public space by publishing opinions. The phenomenon of the public is in this case colonized by the political structures, owner and advertiser systems which are legitimized as strong publics compared to "ordinary" citizens. By claiming to be the public, they can even occupy or swallow up the entire citizen potential. One such example includes political or capital structures in the disguise of civil society.

The idea that the public is not sufficiently "enlightened" and therefore is not competent enough to publish opinions is related to the sociological theorization of mass society, particularly during the first half of the 20th century. According to this, society produces atomized and individualized individuals who do not have an interest in acting publicly. In many cases, the assumption behind this type of theorization, which has frequently attracted criticism, is that the problem lies with individuals and their lack of interest in publishing opinions and in public activity.

Viewed from this perspective, the selective media system appeared as the only sensible alternative. The logic of professional representation resting on a vision of ignorant masses needing organization, which was for several decades corroborated by theoretical and empirical sociological works, contributed to the legitimacy of the professional representation of the public, leading to the marginalization of its potential during the 20th century. Even today the public continues to be described inadequately, for example, using the term "weak public" to denote new social movements that presumably lack true levers

and sufficient potential to generate change, although one can conceptualize that change is effected precisely through the activity of these "weak publics."

The public of public media is a "strong public" composed of national and parliamentary structures and economic lobbies, whose operation is news *par excellence* for public media. The mass media start from the assumption that an *a priori* relevant form of communication is one that originates with the political representatives and economic lobbies and flows in the direction of citizens, from one group of political representatives to the other, and from one economic lobby to a competitive lobby – by way of the media. By automatically attributing newsworthiness to the activity of economic and political structures, the mass media not only emulate PR skills and communication management strategies, but legitimize these structures as a "new public" based on Meyhewen's model (1997).

For public media, the political and economic management of the country is news, while "weak publics" constituted by various movements remain faceless and voiceless. For weak publics, the mass media space is limited. Moreover, these publics are presented in the mass media as invisible or unimportant publics; they are frequently dispossessed of their opinion to the benefit of strong publics, or their opinion is presented as marginal, even damaging, and without the potential for change (Timms 2005).

The professionalization of journalism can also reinforce the representational model of the media, if groups of professionals are formed who supposedly serve the interest

of the public and address the public that has no access to the creation of media content. At least from the time of Dewey's utopian project, which was an example of philosophy in action, it seemed almost inconceivable that the media should not be based on the gatekeeper principle. However, with the help of new technologies and through the activity of alternative publics, for example, through amateur-journalist practices (Atton 2004; 34-5), alternative media, community media and the media of new social movements introduced important alternatives to the dominant belief that media are necessarily legitimized by representational principle and dependent on politics and capital.

Viewed from this perspective, the approach of the mass media, meaning the professional editorial and journalistic practices that overlook the fact that the communicational right to publish opinions belongs to citizens and not to corporations, increasingly appears as just one among many methods of putting world affairs "in order." The criticism of the Indymedia project showed that alternative media, too, may appear in mainstream arrangements, for example, when they become disproportionately exposed as the ultimate example of alternative media production. Neither are alternative media immune to the logic of profit, but, despite this, it is precisely the alternative media in their dimensions of public-generated media that teach us that individual activity, expression and publishing of individual opinions should also be considered outside the current editorial and management practices pursued by the mass media.

3. Public Service Media as a Mechanism of the Nation-State: The Example of Radio Television Slovenia

When discussing the presence (or absence) of the public in the context of public media, we must also mention the confinement of the media within the frameworks of nation-states in addition to their dependence on the logic of economic profitability. The Westphalian-national basis of public sphere theory has been problematized only recently. Fraser (2005) pointed out that it is only the recent increased significance of transnational phenomena associated with globalization, postcoloniality and multiculturalism that has necessitated the reconsideration of public sphere theory in a transnational frame.

The author exposes the current limitations of the politics of nation states to thematize anew the potential of the public to effect changes in a transnational frame. She stresses that the media are constituted as an integral part of a modern nation-state, which should be redefined within the transnational perspective, along with the media. Fraser emphasizes that Westphalian-national print media, radio and television form an essential part of the communication infrastructure of a nation-state. According to this, public service media found legitimacy within the framework of the nation-state management along with the national economy, national citizenry, national language and literature. "The point is," says Fraser, "to generate through (Westphalian-national) processes of public communication a body of (Westphalian-national) public opinion.

This opinion should reflect the communicatively generated (Westphalian-national) general interest of the (Westphalian-national) citizenry concerning the management and ordering of the common conditions of their (Westphalian-national) life, especially the (national) economy. The further point is to empower the body of (Westphalian-national) public opinion so generated vis-à-vis private powers and the national state, to hold the (Westphalian) state accountable to the (Westphalian-national) citizenry, and to 'rationalize' (Westphalian) state domination. So understood, the (national) public sphere is a vital institutional component of (Westphalian-national) democracy" (Ibid.).

Several of the specialized media, alternative media practices, independent media production and changes introduced by new information and communication technologies point to trends towards the denationalization of communication and communication that extend beyond the Westphalian-national borders. If we take into account Fraser's interpretation, these practices are difficult (or impossible) to find within the public media model. Fraser argues that Westphalian-national media as public media became established as a tool aimed at ensuring the success of specific, political and management projects of nation-states.

In the transnational context, however, we confront the question of whether public sphere theory is "so thoroughly national-Westphalian in its deep conceptual structure as to be unsalvageable as a critical tool for theorizing the present?" Fraser sees public-sphere theory as worthy of preservation, but needing reconstruction within the transnational frame because transnational publics cannot be simply transposed to existing institutions. Viewed from this perspective, public media as institutions lack public potential, since changed circumstances exact a reformulation of the critical theory of the public sphere in such a way as to illuminate the emancipatory possibilities of the present "postnational constellation" (Ibid.).

The effect of the Westphalian-national framework can be illustrated empirically using the example of the Radio Television Slovenia Act.[1] Article 1 defines the status of RTV, which is "a public institution of special cultural and national importance" that "performs a public service related to radio and television activities ... with the aim of ensuring the realization of the democratic, social and cultural needs of the citizens of the Republic of Slovenia, of Slovenes abroad, of the members of the Slovene minorities in Italy, Austria and Hungary, and of the Italian and Hungarian communities in the Republic of Slovenia." According to this definition, the public is composed of individuals forming a national community, i.e. citizens of the Republic of Slovenia or groups here singled out as having importance for the nation, including Slovenes abroad and "national" minorities.

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[1] Official Gazette of the RS 96/2005.

In listing the services performed by RTV, the law defines the public in the context of what Fraser termed Westphalian-national citizenry. According to the content of the articles listing the services of RTV Slovenia, these are programs for "autochthonous Italian and Hungarian national communities," "the Roma ethnic community," "Slovene national minorities in neighbouring countries," "Slovene immigrants abroad and expats" as well as the "foreign audience." In other words, in the context of this public media outlet, the public is determined by the national and (limited) ethnic substance, which confirms Fraser's thesis that the public of public media is nationally homogenized and that it is not seen as consisting of dispersed individuals and their changing identities (which transcend interpellation into national and officially recognized ethnic minorities.)[2]

Other publics mentioned in Article 4 are "blind and partially sighted people and deaf and partially hearing people, the disabled and registered religious communities." By defining the Roma as a nationally relevant "ethnic community," or the disabled as "a group with special needs," the law indeed emphasizes the need for content targeted at groups for whom access to the media is harder. However, this kind of wording may also have a different effect: it may homogenize individuals based on a common, pre-defined identity denominator that neglects differences among them. A number of studies, for example, feminist studies, showed that emphasizing common denominators of ethnicity, disability and so on, has the effect of totalizing identity and experience, while creating a marginalized situation, and thus causing social trauma, as when, for example, a person with disability is identified only by his/her handicap.

The categorization of citizens into various publics of public media reveals an understanding of the public as a collection of various categories of citizenry based on national, ethnic or religious principles and an evident identity of the handicapped. My purpose here is not to argue that any differentiation is a priori nonsensical. What I want to point out is the problematic nature of the premises underlying categorization. Within the frameworks thematized by Fraser, categorization serves to give legitimacy to the public media based on national principles, while overlooking the complexities of identification and omitting other groups that belong either in no nationally relevant category, say, migrants, or in the category having "specific national cultural or identity traits", for example, gays and lesbians.

The confinement within the national framework is evident from the wording repeated several times that the programs produced must be of "special importance to the Republic of Slovenia" or must be of "national importance," as formulated in some places. Article 3 mentions two "national" television channels and three "national" radio channels.

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[2] Further analysis of public media in Slovenia as a platform for the reproduction of national identity and the consolidation of the Slovene national identity is accessible in Volčič (2005) and Mihelj (2005).

Obviously, this Act does not try to elaborate the concept of the public, not even on the level of declaration. If we apply Fraser's criticism to the provisions stipulated by this law, the "special national television channel" makes Radio Television Slovenia a "Westphalian-national media outlet" *par excellence*. This special channel is devoted to the representation of the state, in the sense of presenting political technology or, as it is formulated in this law, "to the live broadcasting of the sessions of the National Assembly of the Republic of Slovenia and its working bodies..., to provide complete information to the general public regarding all other parliamentary activities."

References to nationality are also found in the section speaking about the need for programs to "encourage links between national communities and their nation of origin." The Act further mentions "inclusion of cultural and other achievements by the Italian and Hungarian nation in programs aimed at national communities." Other content/programs that categorize the publics of this public institution are programs that "broaden the understanding of Slovene history, culture and identity" and provide information about issues relating to "state defense, including issues regarding the functioning of international institutions that Slovenia is a member of."

By strictly defining national subjects and nationally important content, the law reveals not only that this public media outlet is restricted by the national framework and that it lacks global perspective, but also that it is a representative media outlet that serves to ensure the provision of information on and presentation of nationally important matters. Here, the public is primarily represented by the citizens of Slovenia, autochthonous and national minorities, and Slovenes living abroad.

The law defines the national substance and then presents this public as the recipient of media content. That is how public media "present and promote," "inform," "spread understanding" and "create" media content. Consequently, the principle of activating the public in the context of public media appears impossible. The Radio Television Slovenia Act refers to nationalized subjects as "viewers and listeners" whose active role is reduced to "access to programs wherever possible," as mentioned in Article 4, which lists the services provided by RTV (including provision of information on the issues of security, defense, risks, cultural heritage and so on).

The normative potential of the public for the activation and participation of individuals in the creation of public media content, as Fraser would say, is reduced to addressing the public as a nation and to reporting "Westphalian-national news." According to this interpretation, public media lack the potential to engage with the disperse public that emerges from transnational perspectives and takes shape beyond fixed identities and national frames. Being dependent on political and economic pressures and legal norms, which support the representative system and circumvent the levers that would enable the public to see itself not as an addressee but as the "author of laws" (Habermas 1998), the public media have been drifting away from the concept of public-generated media described above.

4. Capital Management by "Strong Publics"

The operation of the mass media, including public media, is increasingly dependent not only on national interests, but also on owners' and advertisers' capital, which dictates a specific type of media management based on the enterprise management model. The public in the sense of active citizens or of a public space, or of the public engagement of individuals (Pajnik 2006), can hardly be the addressee of the mass media (including public media) conceptualized in this way.

The addressee concept does not concur with the emancipatory and autonomous potential of the public, but rather with that of the audience. In this connection, it is necessary to take into account that in the present essay I try to consider the public as a phenomenon that generates activity, instead of dismissing it as just one among the many products that turn citizens into recipients. The potential of the public lies in the association of individuals and in exchanging speaker and listener positions with the aim of engaging in activities that go beyond the established principles followed by the media in addressing the audience (listeners/viewers), or presenting to them, or representing, for example, politicians (speakers) who are given access to the media.

According to this interpretation, the public is not established through dependence on owner and advertiser influence, or on the interests of political elites, or managerial drive for profit – all forces to which the mass media are subject. Instead, it tries to become actua-

lized *through* such directions. The management model applied to modern mass media produces an audience that is not the public. The difference lies not so much in the passive reception of content and susceptibility to media leverage characteristic of the audience here contrasted with the activity of individuals or groups typical of the public. Such polarization has already been the subject of criticism, since the public so understood may prove to be an exclusivist ideal that only a handful of individuals, or the privileged elite, can approach (Fraser 1992).

Various cultural studies also demythologized the hypotheses, especially popular in the 1960s and 1970s, that the mass media render the audience passive and liable to succumb to manipulation. Since the 1990s, these studies have shifted away from critique of the media seen as social agents that passivize the public by turning it into an audience, and have instead begun to place emphasis on consumers' activity in selecting media content, while also drawing attention to the fragmentation of the audience and its subjectivization. Therefore, in this essay I thematize the public as a phenomenon that has the potential to create new, public-generated media practices, whereby I understand the public not as an exclusivist bourgeois nor as a neo-liberal, post-Fordian mass (Virno 2001), but as an activity taking place outside these frameworks or on their margins. By pursuing practices aimed at overcoming dependence on capital, the public (but not public media as well) is gaining an ever stronger foothold on the edges of modern mass society. These practices include citizen action, movements' activation, the

creation of multitudinous public spaces, and approaches pursued by alternative media, for example, alternative video productions or an alternative use of the Internet.

It is a widespread belief that public media, in contrast to commercial media, address citizens as the public or, first, as the public and only then as consumers. However, it is questionable to what degree the principle of first addressing the public and then consumers can hope to perpetuate the public or, in other words, to what degree it subjects the public to the principle of economic management. Given the circumstances in which the media, guided by economic and political interest, or representation of these interests, address consumers, to what degree can we still speak about the public? The debates on (de)regulation and legal mechanisms aimed at a more careful balancing of the influence exerted by capital appear redundant in this context.

A restriction of the influence exerted by owners, advertisers, politics and capital, through efforts towards transparency of ownership, advocacy of consumer rights and so on, can indeed produce short-term results, but these strategies nevertheless remain the foundation of the enterprise management model applied to (commercial and public) media. Regulatory measures with a short-term effect can hardly "salvage" the public or may even reproduce the elite publics based on the bourgeois model. Given the pressures exerted by capital and advertisers, the question is to what degree the mass media, both public and commercial, can communicate with citizens understood as the public. It seems that aspirations towards citizen participation in communication, and the implementation of genuine communication as opposed to mere exercising of the right to be informed, necessitate activities that challenge the national-economic foundations of the mass media.

Market laws are determined by the drive for profit and by overstated post-Fordian mechanisms aimed at stimulating the free market and economic growth. The underlying quest for profit does not contribute to the animation of public activity or the emergence of new publics, despite regulatory measures in the media field. Although it is expected that regulatory measures will bring about more independent print media and television and more inclusive programs, the power of the market, of advertisers and "infotainment" is also increasing daily. Alternative publics, which introduce changes in media practices and co-create alternative, minority and non-profit media, are increasingly becoming counter-publics active at the edges of the mass society of commercial and public media. These publics are not solely reactionary as they are frequently branded, and their primary aim is not to exercise influence or earn profit. They emerge as a result of the practices mentioned above and, to echo Holloway (2002), they emerge beyond these practices.

Undoubtedly, alternative media should not be absolutized as having nothing to do with economic principles. But there does exist an essential difference between alternative media, on the one hand, and commercial and public media, on the other: the latter do not problematize post-modern PR strategies used in reporting, but take them as a social fact. Accordingly, for these media profit is a natu-

ral frame of reference determining their operations. I see the potential of public-oriented media practices precisely in their ability to shatter this taken-for-granted logic that rests on profit increase and loss reduction. In this regard, public-oriented media develop at the edges of the post-capitalist system by implementing alternative practices in media management, for example, by rejecting traditional gatekeeper methods or by shaping content that introduces news topics that are considered non-news from the point of view of the mass media.

Therefore, Dewey's idea of public-generated media is today not realized by the mass media, either public or commercial. Being an element of the system governed by capital, in which the performance of the media is assessed primarily on the basis of added and surplus value, they are hardly capable of creating a space for public deliberation. In this regard, the difference between modern public and commercial media is almost negligible. For both, the public is more or less a (random) addressee and a welcome consumer. The participatory role of the public is reduced to the redundant option of call-in shows (voting) and the writing of readers' letters.

Public radio and television and the so-called main (national) newspapers also depart from the notion of public-generated media by pursuing a professional logic according to which an "in-house" journalist knows best what is good for the public. Examples from the Slovenian print media show that individual opinions that differ from the policy of the newspaper or the professional opinion of an "in-house" journalist, who frequently privatizes opinion on a certain issue, usually cannot find room in the media and are considered incompatible with managerial or political guiding principles.

The totalization of the journalist's opinion is reflected, for example, in the insistence on the position of "in-house" journalist, who thus becomes the only legitimate author of opinion pertaining to a specific topic. The implementation of the principle of democracy and the care for the public good are therefore reduced to allowing certain individuals, not belonging to the journalistic milieu, to express opinions, whereby the process of selecting these individuals is closely controlled. Or, as Brian (1998; 13, 15) says, the mass media allow access to content creation to a handful of individuals only; content is created in such a way that one person speaks while thousands or millions listen.

The survival of the mass media is increasingly dependent on media consumption, with commercial media being fully dependent on it and public media being anything but immune to it. What sets apart public media from commercial media are certain legal mechanisms serving to protect public media from complete dependence on economic principles. Various dimensions of the public sphere are promoted as if they were *de facto* part of public media, and as if occasional adjustments of economic levers were sufficient to ensure their public character. However, the public sphere does not simply arise as a result of restricting the influence of owners' and advertisers' interests.

Since media operation is governed by market laws, legal mechanisms are primarily

intended for the regulation of media understood as market players, while the public is of secondary importance. It is questionable to what degree, despite legal norms, the media that remain dependent on market principles can be in the service of the public, not to mention their ability to create a space in which the public could take shape. Viewed from this perspective, the greatest benefit derived from regulatory measures is that they create less commercialized media, if it is sensible at all to speak of greater or lesser commercialization in the light of the struggle for economic survival that is equally important for both commercial and public media. Even if restrained by regulation, commercialization cannot create the climate needed to establish links between the public and the mass media, i.e. to bring about public-generated media.

Current commercialization keeps media confined to the economic principles of management evident from the commercial language promoting competitiveness, technological innovation, sales promotion, ownership control, professionalism of journalists, responsibility towards consumers, and so on. Within this type of social development based on capital accumulation and advancement of the goals of political clientele, it seems that the problem with public media is that nothing public can exist within them. The example of public media proves the utopian nature of the idea of newspapers as forums for debate and opinion exchange, but this certainly does not preclude public media from striving to achieve these goals. On the contrary, the very utopianism of such an outlook poses the need to thematize the public potential

of the media. At the same time, this utopianism points to an increasingly obvious fact, namely, that (alternative) publics are today formed at the edges of ideologies governing the market, regulation and commercialization, all of which determine the operation of the mass media. Alternative publics cannot be the product of these practices, since editors and journalists as gate keepers co-create a media-political-economic agenda by selecting the desired content, which *per definitionem* eliminates refractory opinions. In the case of the mass media, these opinions are neutralized by means of monopolistic and oligarchic practices; such a market "takes care that all unpleasant and annoying voices are removed" (Splichal 2005; 131).

My thesis here is that the public media, because of their dependence on economic factors and the interests of owners and advertisers, increasingly resemble commercial media; capital concentration is a reality for both. The influence of specific interests is inherent to the operation of commercial media, and, as such, it is not problematized. On the other hand, the necessity of preserving the independence of the public media is emphasized, although in present circumstances that independence is frequently fictitious. It is also necessary to draw attention to the unsuitability of policies that push public media towards the increasing dependence on economic and political interests, as well as to advocate the independence of public media and emphasize the need for changes that will bring them closer to public-generated media. However, it is difficult to dispel the impression that current political and economic constraints ac-

tually do not leave room for public media to operate as public-generated media and that solutions should be sought elsewhere, beyond the enterprise model and the professional journalism approach.

The problematization of the public media and emphasis on the importance of preserving their public dimension do not exclude a search for the public potential in alternative media practices. Nevertheless, in the future more attention should be accorded to alternative practices that employ different ways to regulate economic dependence, including low-budget production, which places more emphasis on content, to on-line communication, which allows (could allow) economic independence, and to new media practices, for example, in the video segment (Babič 2006).

5. Conclusions

This article highlighted the trends leading to the exhaustion of the potential of the public in public media and illustrated how, under the influence of political and economic interests, the public of the public media has diverged from the original idea implying the activity of individuals and their shaping of the media. The example of RTV Slovenia illustrates the constraints placed upon the public media by a national framework; it also reveals the lack of any desire to reformulate public media within a transnational frame that has been transpiring beyond acknowledged identity policies. Recent studies have confirmed the thesis that the mass media, being subject to economic pressures, treat the public as addressees and consumers. They

have also shown that the media have been undergoing a process of transformation through which they have changed from spaces within the public sphere into mediated spaces for the mediation of economic power – not necessarily mediated to the public, but rather to other power centers.

Speaking about the potential of the public in connection with the media, it seems that this phenomenon should also be thematized outside the framework of public media. In so saying, I do not want to discredit attempts to "rehabilitate" the public of public media, but I do want to stress that development trends suggest that future publics will tend to be formed at the edges of or beyond the mass media and not only within the framework of the mass media. A new potential for a different understanding of the public has been provided by studies of alternative media (Atton 2004), social movement media (Downing 2005) that look into the possibility of producing public-generated media outside mass media production: the Internet, independent media centers, fanzine culture, open source initiatives, Internet radio, etc. These studies challenge the profit-oriented character of the current methods of information provision practiced by the mass media and the management and political strategies governing media companies. In these studies, public-generated media forms emerge as a result of the activity of committed individuals, interventions, networking, all done in a quest for non-dominant forms of media operation. They appear as a public space that enables new forms of media production and distribution, where individuals co-create the media, appear as ac-

tors and are not excluded from these media as mere recipients.

Alternative media, or individual amateur-journalists as imagined by Dewey, also reshape the norms of journalistic reporting. For example, independent media centers offer narratives from committed activists and amateur journalists who operate outside the institutionalized frameworks of media companies. By radicalizing journalistic practices, that is, by exchanging objectivity for responsibility, by creating a progressive media environment and redefining the public within participatory practices and transnational perspectives, amateur-journalists certainly encourage new media conceptualizations.

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ABSTRACT

The paper deals with contemporary mass media dependence on politics and capital and attempts to discern what, if anything, is still public about mass media in general, and public broadcasting in particular. A consideration of the public as a phenomenon of individual aspirations is central to this discussion, seeing as it will help shed light on public broadcasting's (in)ability to encompass the public's activity, particularly when addressing the public in its transnational appearances. The paper makes use of public broadcasting in Slovenia as a model through which it examines public broadcasting as a framework for the economic and political interests of the nation-state. The paper proceeds to thematize lack of potential of public broadcasting to address the dispersed public that is emerging transnationally, outside of fixed ideas of identity and national affiliations. The argument is presented as for why contemporary discussions of the potentials of the public in its relation to the media should consider the practices of the public not only in the sphere of mass media, but also beyond and, to a certain extent, in contrast to mass media – through examples of attempts to reactivate the public in the potentials of "public-generated media".

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