

On a Potential Paradox of a Public Service Internet

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Abstract: Digital capitalism undermines deliberative democracy. This is the diagnosis arrived at by *The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto* (2021), edited by Christian Fuchs and Klaus Unterberger, and Jürgen Habermas' *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* (2023). They condemn the commercial Internet as a deformation of the public sphere and conclude that it needs to be fundamentally restructured. Interestingly, both texts propose to restructure it after the template of broadcasting media. We seek to challenge this approach from a media-political perspective, arguing that it revives an elapsed version of democracy by rekindling the mass media paradigm to which it was bound. Both texts are implicitly based on the assumption that a technology that emerged in capitalism can be used for different, even contradictory, purposes. But what if the media structure of digital communication, irrespective of who owns or controls it, denies its democratic instrumentalisation?

Keywords: digital capitalism, late capitalism, deliberative democracy, mass media, alternative Internet, Public Service Internet, technology, Habermas

1. Introduction

This paper examines the complex nexus of democracy and media technologies in the age of digital capitalism. For this purpose, two recent publications will be juxtaposed: *The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet* (2021, hereafter: *PSMIM*), edited by Christian Fuchs and Klaus Unterberger, and Jürgen Habermas' *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* (2023)¹. Both texts condemn the current commercial organisation of the Internet² for its deformation of deliberative democracy. Both argue that the Internet needs to be restructured after the template of traditional broadcasting media, more specifically Public Service Media, to safeguard democracy. From this juxtaposition derives a set of interlinked aims. First, we seek to demonstrate the key parallels between these two criticisms, the debatable understanding of technology within capitalism that informs them, and their shared roots within Habermas' earlier theory of the public sphere. Second, in going back to this earlier theory, we want to highlight a central paradox that emerges concerning Public Service Media and their history, whereby their mission to democratise can itself be deemed undemocratic because of its centralised administration of the *per definitionem*

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² We define the Internet as an assemblage of four layers: first, the global system of connected networks using the TCP/IP protocol; second, the interlinked web of websites based on that network; third, the different local computing machines (personal computers, smartphones etc.) on which browsers are installed to access the websites, and fourth, the organisations and institutions (like ICANN etc.) that regulate the Internet.

unadministered public sphere. Third, this paradox will be examined as a microcosm of the precarious approximation of democracy and capitalism in the Fordist age – an approximation predicated on the mass media paradigm, whose dissolution in the post-Fordist age reveals digital media as an ideal expression of the neoliberal erosion of mass democracy. In a final step, we argue that an emancipatory politics under digital capitalism cannot rely on remedies that revive an elapsed version of democracy by rekindling the mass media paradigm to which it was bound. Rather – and we can only point to this outlook without engaging with it here – it is the idea(l) of democracy itself that must be rethought, not against but alongside the Internet’s current structure.

2. The Internet’s Destruction of Deliberation

Democracy plays a key role in the *PSMIM*. Its first principle states: “Democracy and digital democracy require Public Service Media” (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 8). Its second principle clarifies: “A democracy-enhancing Internet requires Public Service Media becoming Public Service Internet platforms that help to advance opportunities and equality in the society” (8). The inception of a new media-technological infrastructure like the Public Service Internet not only entails but actively strives for the transformation of political consciousness within the novel communicative situation it engenders. The *Manifesto*’s third principle consequently proclaims that “Public Service Media content is distinctive from commercial media and data companies. It addresses citizens, not consumers,” (8) while the seven remaining principles add to this telling enumeration the importance of a funding structure independent of the state and private corporations, which ensures the creation of formats and contents that “realise fairness, democracy, participation, civic dialogue and engagement on the Internet” (8).

For the *PSMIM*, to restructure the dominant media landscape and, therein, the Internet means to restore the possibility of truly democratic communication. This commendable plea raises a question: What joint vision of democracy and digital media is represented here? We suspect that an answer to this question may disclose some of the assumptions that permeate the discourse surrounding digital capitalism concerning (i) the relationship between digital capitalism and democracy in the Global North, and (ii) the relationship between capitalism and technology more generally.

The need for a Public Service Internet arises from the “threat to democracy” (21) posed by the prevailing commercial order of the Internet and its oligopolistic platforms. Put succinctly in a later chapter of the *Manifesto*:

“The Internet and the media are today dominated by commerce, digital surveillance, targeted and personalised advertisements, fragmented online publics, filter bubbles; the lack of human listening, engagement and meaningful debate; a highly individualistic attention economy where a few influencers dominate visibility and voice, false news, post-factual politics, authoritarianism; online hatred in the form of digital fascism, right-wing extremism, racism and conspiracy theories that spread on the Internet and social media; algorithmic politics where bots try to control political communication and so on” (114).

The primary diagnosis of this assertion is one of *encumbered communication*. It retraces a well-known image of a cacophony of voices (Pajnik and Downing 2008; Carr 2010), uninterested in compromise or constructive discussion, pushed towards individualism by algorithms that reward sectarianism over unanimity to monetise attention (Pariser 2011), all within echo chambers whose confusion of fact and fiction conjures distrust in political institutions (Harsin 2015). For the *PSMIM*, this undermining of

rational debate spells the “*destruction of deliberation, the public sphere and democracy*” (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 116) – a threat that can only be counteracted through the creation of a public service infrastructure of free, yet mediated discussion.

The wording of this tricolon – deliberation, public sphere, and democracy – divulges an unmistakable Habermasian rhetoric traceable throughout the *PSMIM*. It comes to the fore most explicitly in Graham Murdock’s (2021) contribution to the Manifesto-book, in which he references *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1962) when ascribing to his vision of the digital commons “the potential to create contemporary coffeehouses without walls and social exclusions, combining access to the full range of imaginative and information resources that support effective participation with new spaces of encounter and deliberation” (Murdock 2021, 86). This revival of a liberal vision of democracy – based on the power of deliberation as the consensus-driven rule of the majority – is itself reminiscent of the “explosion of initiatives in the second half of the 1990s making reference to ‘virtual’ democracy” (Jankowski and van Selm 2000, 149) that celebrated concepts like the “digital agora” for its ability to mend the fragmented public sphere (Rheingold 1995; Tsagarousianou, Tambini, and Bryan 1998). Within these initiatives, Habermas’ notion of the public sphere is portrayed as having been saved from its protracted decline, or even truly realised for the first time.

Naturally, the *PSMIM* offers a decidedly more critical approach. It maintains that if the Internet does not yet fulfil this messianic quality, it at least harbours its potential once restructured into a Public Service Internet that restores the supremacy of communicative over instrumental reason. It should not come as a surprise, then, that Habermas himself signed the *Manifesto*, shortly before publishing his own reevaluation of his 1962 ideas in his book *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* (2023) to which we will now turn.

Habermas’ diagnosis of the digital downfall of deliberative democracy evinces many similarities to that of the *PSMIM*. He criticises the communicative situation of social media, which endorses “a further advance in the commodification of lifeworld contexts” by adhering to “the imperatives of capital valorization” (Habermas 2023, 46-47). The danger of this subversion of communicative reason – which in the 1980s Habermas had elaborated as the “colonization of the lifeworld” (Habermas 1987/1981, 333) – lies in the creation of what, in the German original, he calls *Halböffentlichkeiten*, i.e., semi- or pseudo-public spheres created by intrusions of private matters into the public sphere. Under digital capitalism, these intrusions form more than mere temporary amalgamations; they gradually impair “*the perception of this boundary between the private and public spheres of life*” (Habermas 2023, 21). Habermas attributes to the private sphere all non-political areas of social life, e.g., family and leisure time but also the larger market economy as well as relations of production and class. The public sphere, by contrast, is constituted by the convocation of private individuals for the processes of rational-critical debate and will formation, which, in turn, legitimate and scrutinise the legislative authority of governmental institutions (Habermas 1996/1992, 442). Tensions between the private and public spheres are neither new nor bound to a specific medium. They are constitutive of representative democracies as such and point to the inherent struggle between capitalism and democracy. However, these tensions are exacerbated by digital media. They erode the phenomenological line between public and private and instrumentalise this erosion as a lucrative catalyst of user engagement. The fragmentation of the public sphere becomes its own mode of accumulation, reinforced within *filter bubbles* that make deliberation increasingly impossible:

“From a point of view fortified by the mutual confirmation of users’ judgements, claims to universality extending beyond their own horizons become suspect in principle of hypocrisy. From the limited perspective of such a *semi-public sphere*, the political public sphere of constitutional democracies loses the appearance of an inclusive space for a possible discursive clarification of competing claims to truth and a general equal consideration of interests”. (Habermas 2023, 55)

Again, we encounter a diagnosis of *encumbered communication*. For Habermas, the communicative situation of digital platforms must be understood not only regarding the political discourse it enables or inhibits but also concerning the experiential parameters it imposes on will formation and participation. What is key, in this context, is Habermas’ specific understanding of “deliberative democracy”, which is as much a media-theoretical concept as it is a political one (Dahlgren 2005, 156). It is this duality that informs his argumentative structure. Habermas begins by emphasising the existential necessity of deliberation within the heterogeneous society of the twenty-first century. It is more than an ideal by which a given socio-political order is to be measured, because “[t]he more heterogeneous a society’s conditions of life, cultural forms of life and individual lifestyles are, the more the lack of an a fortiori *existing* background consensus must be counterbalanced by the commonality of public opinion and will *formation*” (Habermas 2023, 10). Within a plurality of worldviews, deliberation acts as a *filter* that “takes into account the expectation that solutions to problems should be cognitively correct and viable” and that “*grounds the assumption* that the results are rationally acceptable” (13). Only then can consensus be “institutionalized in a way that incorporates communicative reason” (Deitelhoff 2018, 529). This process of filtration lays claim to two forms of representation:

(i) The inclusion of the electorate “in the representative bodies of parliamentary law-making” (Habermas 2023, 14); (ii) the representation of a “more or less *informed pluralism of opinion* filtered by the media system” that enables citizens “to form his or her *own* opinion and to make *an election decision* that is *rationally motivated* from his or her point of view” (15).

Together, political *and* media representation counteract the “cacophony of conflicting opinions unleashed in the public sphere” (17). It is exactly this system of filtration that is corrupted by the commercial Internet, where – as we have seen in the *PSMIM* – the cacophony of voices is turned into a mode of accumulation. This leads both texts to the same conclusion: To afford true democratic deliberation, principles of filtration must be imposed upon the Internet; it must be remodelled after the template of broadcasting media.

3. Two Media Paradigms

The top-down or “gatekeeper” structure of broadcasting media – by which Habermas mostly means radio and television – creates a public space “in which the communicative din can condense into relevant and effective public opinions” (Habermas 2023, 31). Naturally, this does not mean that mass media are somehow immune to the private appropriation or circumnavigation of their filtering system on the levels of either production or consumption. Nevertheless, these cases form exceptions rather than the rule within its media paradigm. The same cannot be said for the Internet. “What is different”, notes Cass R. Sunstein, “is a dramatic increase in individual control over content and a corresponding decrease in the power of general interest intermediaries, including newspapers, magazines, and broadcasters” (Sunstein 2009, 95). “One effect

is the self-empowerment of media users,” writes Habermas, “the other is the price the latter pay for being released from the editorial tutelage of the old media” (Habermas 2023, 38). He concludes:

“It is harmful for a democratic system as a whole when the infrastructure of the public sphere is no longer able to direct the citizens’ attention to the relevant issues that need to be decided or to ensure the formation of competing public opinions – and that means, *qualitatively filtered* opinions” (Habermas 2023, 57)

It is interesting how a certain “qualitative” kind of filtration is deemed necessary, while certain other forms of filtration, i.e., filter bubbles, are seen as problematic. Habermas sees the “fundamental flaw” in the fact that “platforms, unlike traditional media, do not want to accept liability for the dissemination of truth-sensitive, and hence deception-prone, communicative contents” (58). Against the white noise that threatens the public sphere, qualitative filtering must be reestablished within a media structure “that enables the inclusiveness of the public sphere and the deliberative character of public opinion and will formation” (59). This is Habermas’ version of an alternative Internet. He weighs the bottom-up filter bubbles of digital platforms against the top-down qualitative filtering of classical mass media. An ‘alternative Internet’ is urged to behave like radio and television – one media paradigm is thus imposed onto another.

Although Habermas’ theoretical reflections represent a different genre of text than the politically pointed *PSMIM* with its concrete demands, some decisive parallels can nevertheless be identified in their approaches to an alternative Internet. The point here is not to ascribe to them the same project simply because Habermas has signed the *Manifesto*, but to work out a set of shared presuppositions regarding the relationship between democracy and digital media. Like Habermas, the *Manifesto* criticises that “[d]igital technologies’ dominant forms and uses are destroying traditional media structures” (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 114). Against this backdrop, “public broadcasting” (9, 11, 91) is from the very beginning the template which directs the transformation of the Internet. The idea is to de-privatise the Internet, to turn it into a publicly funded broadcasting infrastructure similar to the German first and second television programs or the BBC: “The original idea was simple and changed society: A public broadcasting service that is paid for out of public funds, independent of government, equally accessible to all, provides trusted information and analysis of issues that are of common concern” (9). In accordance with its genre of text, the *Manifesto* goes a decisive step further than Habermas’ theoretical inferences. It envisions a complex amalgam of centralised mass media and decentralised digital media technologies. Thus, an alternative Internet not only builds on the structures of broadcasting media but enriches them: “Public Service Internet platforms build on the broadcast model and go beyond it by making full use of and transforming the creative potentials of digital technologies and user participation” (14). This is a crucial difference between the two texts at hand: A democratic Internet according to the *PSMIM* would offer a space of deliberation, where “rights to speak are matched by responsibilities to listen attentively, and in good faith, to rival claims” (85). Ideally, the Public Service Internet would combine the top-down filtration of mass media with the subjectivity of the *prosumer* fostered by new media.

In the impressive survey that forms the *Manifesto*’s basis, many voices formulate hopes in this vein: “In 2040, Public Service Media has transformed from one-to-many broadcasting institutions into a network infrastructure that is guided by principles of public network value” (17). Others include: “[I]n the best possible world, the internet is entirely demonetized, that is nobody even thinks of making money off it” (Fuchs 2021b,

31). Or: “There is no media industry, neither large conglomerates nor individual wannabe stars. Advertising and intellectual property are banned, or at least heavily taxed” (Fuchs 2021b, 31). These examples point to social contexts very different from ours: an obviously post-capitalist world that is at least partially demonetised with no advertising or intellectual property. But the *Manifesto* is not about post-capitalism. It is about the more modest transformation of the Internet, for which mass media form the basic template. Nonetheless, it remains unclear to what extent this vision is compatible with the actual media specificities of either broadcasting media or the Internet. How can a single medium possess the “productive role of journalistic mediation and programme designed performed by the old media” (Habermas 2023, 36), while simultaneously ensuring every single user’s “rights to speak” (Murdock 2021, 85)? Before turning to the deeper incongruities that this unanswered question opens up, we will turn to its implications concerning the relationship between technology and capitalism. To speak about a possible restructuring of the Internet at all, is to suggest that a media technology can be somehow ‘repurposed’ and distanced (if not separated) from its origins. While we are not arguing against this notion, we think it necessary to place it in a wider theoretical context that will allow us to grasp its implications concerning the democratic potential of digital media.

4. The Question of Technology and Capitalism

Habermas and the *PSMIM* hold that the technological infrastructure of societal communication is deformed and must be changed to restore the, somewhat idealised, status of democracy given with public broadcasting media. One can imagine that the question of technological transformation has even to be radicalised when envisioning the transition to a post-capitalist society (as can be seen from many of the answers to the survey in the *PSMIM*, 19-68). But a mere remodelling of the Internet after the template of broadcasting media, which were, despite not being owned solely privately, characteristic for capitalist democracies in the second half of the twentieth century, is presumably not enough for post-capitalism. But can an alternative politics be realised by using ‘differently’ a technology that emerged in capitalism? Indeed, this is a much-discussed question in critical theory that Habermas himself discussed in his 1968 essay “Technology and Science as ‘Ideology’”. Here, he distances himself from Herbert Marcuse, who argues that in a post-capitalist society, “science would arrive at essentially different concepts of nature and establish essentially different facts” (Marcuse 2007/1964, 170). From this, Marcuse concludes that a different technology must be conceived:

“To the degree to which the goal of pacification determines the Logos of technics, it alters the relation between technology and its primary object, Nature. Pacification presupposes mastery of Nature, which is and remains the object opposed to the developing subject. But there are two kinds of mastery: a repressive and a liberating one” (Marcuse 2007/1964, 240).

Habermas argues against this, claiming that technology is an anthropological feature of the “human species as a *whole*, and not one that could be historically surpassed” (1970/1968, 87). Andrew Feenberg (1996) discusses the relation between Habermas’ and Marcuse’s approaches, underlining especially the notion of “design”. He argues against Habermas that technological rationality is not neutral but also against Marcuse that a change of technology does not presuppose a quasi-Heideggerian shift in being – but that a different design in accordance with an appropriate politics might bring

decisive improvement. Habermas observes: “In many passages of *One-Dimensional Man*, revolutionizing technological rationality means only a transformation of the institutional framework which would leave untouched the forces of production as such” (1970/1968, 88). There is e.g., one passage by Marcuse which reads: “Technics, as a universe of instrumentalities, may increase the weakness as well as the power of man” (2007/1964, 240). Marcuse gives an example surprisingly close to the case we discuss here:

“One may still insist that the machinery of the technological universe is ‘as such’ indifferent towards political ends – it can revolutionize or retard a society. *An electronic computer can serve equally a capitalist or socialist administration* [...]. This *neutrality* is contested in Marx’s controversial statement that the ‘hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill society with the industrial capitalist.’ And this statement is further modified in Marxian theory itself: the social mode of production, not technics is the basic historical factor. However, when technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality – a ‘world’ (Marcuse 2007/1964, 157-158; our emphasis; Marcuse quotes Marx 1936/1847, 92³).

It is interestingly the “electronic computer” which is used to discuss the notoriously difficult problem of the neutrality of technology. This problem is discussed in many different fields of critical theory (starting perhaps with Marx), and this is hardly surprising, given the central role of technology in capitalist modernity. That we speak today of “digital capitalism” is another example of that: “Technology is not neutral. We’re inside of what we make, and it’s inside of us” (Haraway, quoted in Kunzru 1997). We want to underline four central elements of this problem:

1. *Potentiality and concrete uses*: The neutrality of technology means that technology can be used in (politically) different ways – a simple example: A knife can be used to cut vegetables, but it can also be used to kill. Its potential to cut does not dictate *what* will be cut, but without a knife, *cutting* as such is impossible (or at least more difficult). This, of course, changes things. A “world” – as Marcuse puts it – with cutting is different from one without. This potentiality is political in the sense that it introduces possibilities and barriers that did not exist before. The Internet is a complex technology that has never been wholly public or wholly private, wholly commercial or wholly non-commercial, and that allows many different ‘good’ or ‘bad’ uses. It has yet to be shown what its potentialities are for democratic politics. The alternatives envisioned by the *PSMIM* and Habermas point in this direction, yet the Internet’s actual historical development, which has made their interventions necessary in the first place, points in another.

2. *Graduality of (Non-)Neutrality*: There might be technologies that are more or less neutral than others. There might be racist and sexist biases in digital systems, either consciously inscribed or, more likely, because given datasets are formed by a racist history (Noble 2018). While it seems plausible that complex software and its big data sets can be biased, in the case of a much simpler technology like a hammer this is not so easy to see: Can a hammer be racially biased? As Langdon Winner (1980) writes in his much-debated paper:

“First are instances in which the invention, design, or arrangement of a specific technical device or system becomes a way of settling an issue in a particular

³ On the different concepts of the machine in Marx see McKenzie (1984).

community. [...] Second are cases of what can be called inherently political technologies, man-made systems that appear to require, or to be strongly compatible with, particular kinds of political relationships” (Winner 1980, 123).

For the first case, Winner gives the example of New York bridges whose low height excludes buses and therefore the poorer – and black – part of the population. For the second case, he uses the example of nuclear energy – a technology that requires partially authoritarian structures simply to safeguard the reactors. The first case could have *different* political implications and is thus ‘more neutral.’ The second case enforces a certain political structure and is therefore ‘less neutral.’ Viewed within this framework, the Internet is not a technology that enforces a certain politics, but since it is a complex assemblage of different hardware (who is connected, with what speed?) and software (how are the interfaces designed?) it is surely less neutral. It is inscribed with a certain politics.⁴ This politics cannot be separated from the media technology that embodies and concretises it. It is this separation, however, that Habermas and the *PSMIM* ostensibly deem not only possible but necessary when calling for the imposition of one media paradigm upon another.

3. *Historicity and Specificity*: For the discussion at hand, this is the most important aspect. Already in Marx, we can find the idea that technology has political implications: “It would be possible to write a whole history of the inventions made since 1830 for the sole purpose of providing capital with weapons against working-class revolt” (1976/1867, 562). Suppose this would be true for the Internet too – and given its current use as a technology of worker and consumer surveillance this does not seem too farfetched –, the question stands: Could it then be used differently? Marx’s formulation is ambiguous: Does it say that (i.) a technology developed in capitalism is ‘inherently capitalist,’ or does it (ii.) mean that it is neutral and is only used for class war? Habermas and the *PSMIM* ostensibly side with the second option. But (iii.) are these even different options? Perhaps in going back to the question of the graduality of neutrality: (ad i) ‘Inherently capitalist’ would mean that a technology can only be used for capitalist purposes, while (ad ii) there are technologies that *can* be used otherwise.

In some newer approaches, the view that technology is indeed neutral and can be used for better or worse, which dominated (post-)Marxist theoretical tradition, is decidedly doubted. Giest (2016), for example, insists on a rereading of Marx’s notion of real subsumption, which describes how technologies are not only used but formed by capital. Kurz (2004, 112-121) adds from the perspective of revolutionary politics how the ‘artefacts from history’ should be filtered for use in a post-capitalist society. He uses the notion of “Formvergiftung” (“poisoned form,” 117, 118, 119) to demonstrate how things developed in capitalism are contaminated by its principles.⁵

From this perspective, it becomes clear that Habermas’ and the *PSMIM*’s notion of an alternative Internet is based on the anything-but-settled assumption that the Internet is a neutral technology that can be used for different, even contradictory, purposes. While the *Manifesto* – in its more inclusive vision of an amalgam of mass and digital media infrastructures – makes an argument for neutrality on the grounds that the

⁴ Regarding the wide field of alternative networks, especially for minorities and in the Global South see e.g., Goggin and McLelland (2017), Bory (2020), Acey et al. (2021).

⁵ For other discussions of these problems in different forms of (post-)Marxist Theory see Panzieri 1972 and Castoriadis 1984, 221-248; on technology in Castoriadis see also Ernst/Schröter 2022; see also the overview Feenberg 2010, 67-82. For theoretical positions in non-Marxist fields, especially in “Science and Technology Studies” (= STS), see e. g. Latour 1991. Feenberg (1996, 46, 54) relates Habermas, Marcuse to STS.

Internet's (currently anti-democratic) politics may potentially be 'balanced out' through an expansion and enhancement of its technology with other centralised mechanisms, Habermas writes on the genealogy of the Internet:

"The globally expanded zone of free flows of communication originally made possible by the invention of the technical structure of the 'net' presented itself as the mirror image of an ideal market. This market did not first have to be de-regulated. In the meantime, however, this suggestive image is being disrupted by the algorithmic control of communication flows that is feeding the concentration of market power of the largest internet corporations" (Habermas 2023, 58)⁶.

The emergence of net oligopolies is, of course, not a distortion of the deregulated flow of communication but its logical consequence. In that sense, the Internet was – since its opening for commerce in 1992 (Ceruzzi 2008, 29-30) – a capitalist technology. But even then, the fact that it was not always open for commerce points to the possibility of another Internet, as does the case of Chinese regulation which shows that 'designs' (in Feenberg's sense) are possible that have been thought impossible in the utopian days of the Internet.⁷

4. *Unintended effects*: In *Capital, Vol. 3* Marx writes: "The development of the productive forces of social labour is capital's historic mission and justification. For that very reason, it unwittingly creates the material conditions for a higher form of production" (Marx 1981/1894, 368). In the German original "unwittingly" is "unbewußt." This means that technologies that are made to have capitalist effects could also exhibit unexpected – unconscious – side effects. Although productive forces are made to expand the capitalist mode of production, they may also lead to its destruction (concerning the Internet see on this point Schröter 2012). Any technology – even a "poisoned" one – can exhibit effects *neither intended by design nor by use*. Since "the" Internet is a complex assemblage of different hardware, software, practices, politics etc. it possesses an instability and malleability, as Feenberg (2012) underlines. Its commercialisation after 1992 had unintended side effects – e.g., the disruption of copyright, which is fought with the law. The idea that the availability of information would lead to mass enlightenment led to the white noise of way too much information. A vision of cyberdemocracy turned into its opposite. Because of such unintended effects, it might be generally impossible to construct an Internet with stabilised political benefits. This possibility should not be understood as a defeatist cop-out or a call for a *laissez-faire* approach to an Internet that could sooner or later "turn democratic" on its own. Instead, it opens up the possibility that the *same* structures of the Internet that have overwhelmed and destabilised the principles of representative and deliberative democracy may yet afford new forms of post-democratic (Dean, Anderson, and Lovink 2006) politics that draw not from ideals of representation and filtration but connectivity and flux. This should accompany any notion of a restructuring of the Internet for the purpose of democratisation – especially when it involves the imposition of an older media paradigm whose own graduality of neutrality is left surprisingly unaccounted for.

5. Democracy and Mass Media

Habermas and the *PSMIM* view the Internet as a sufficiently neutral technology, not inherently poisoned by the capitalist circumstances of its conception – a technology

⁶ On the discourse of the Internet as the perfect market, see Schröter 2004, 123-132.

⁷ On Internet utopias see Schröter 2004, 20-148 and Flichy 2007.

whose democratic potential can be restored through the imposition of a mass media paradigm. To contextualise this view, it is high time to take a closer look at the role mass media previously played in the book that explicitly underlies the *PSMIM*'s idea(l) of deliberative democracy, and from which Habermas derives the title of his work: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962).

For anyone familiar with his *Habilitationsschrift*, Habermas' recent lament over the public's release from the "editorial tutelage of the old media" (Habermas 2023, 38) likely comes as a surprise. Was it not these same media that he had previously condemned as gravediggers of democracy:

"Under the pressure of the 'Don't talk back!' the conduct of the public assumes a different form. In comparison with printed communications the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under "tutelage," which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree" (Habermas 1991/1962, 170-171).

The top-down structure of mass media – rehabilitated sixty years later as a template of qualitative filtering – is thereby charged with the manipulation of its audience. Mass media's specific constellation of reception based on spatial and temporal synchronicity weakens deliberation by imposing its own experiential parameters onto the process of will formation and participation. Its technology is not neutral but charged, from the very beginning, with manipulative power.

We have encountered this argument before in Habermas' criticism of digital pseudo-public spheres, which is thus not as specific to the Internet as it may have first appeared. In 1962, Habermas writes: "The deprivatized province of interiority was hollowed out by the mass media; a *pseudo-public sphere* of a no longer literary public was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity" (Habermas 1991/1962, 162; our emphasis). This entails the influx of private opinions into the public sphere. Instead of *preventing* this influx – as is argued in 2023 – , the top-down structure of mass is actually said to *enforce* it: "Thus, discussion seems to be carefully cultivated and there seems to be no barrier to its proliferation. But surreptitiously it has changed in a specific way: it assumes the form of a consumer item" (164). Debate is turned into an item of consumption; audiences are addressed not as citizens but as consumers. The "web of public communication [is] unraveled into acts of individuated reception, however uniform in mode" (161), while public opinion has "decomposed into the informal opinions of private citizens" (247). Is this description not a structural precursor of the Internet's sectarianism – filter bubbles *avant la lettre*? While debate in a world of letters was unformalised, mass media debates are *filtered* and administered; "the rational debate of private people becomes one of the production numbers of the stars in radio and television, a salable package ready for the box office" (164). The principles of filtration that would later form the template of an alternative Internet are thereby criticised due to their restriction of self-directed deliberation.

In 1962, Habermas explicitly criticised mass media for their anti-democratic character. Crucially, the aspects he criticised are strikingly similar to those at the heart of his critique of digital capitalism – privatism, pseudo-public spheres, 'filter bubbles', and consumerism, all leading to a diagnosis of encumbered communication. Mass media are shown to be incommensurable with a democratic public as understood by C. W. Mills – to whom Habermas gives the last word – , where "(1) virtually as many people

express opinions as receive them. (2) Public communications are so organised that there is a chance immediately and effectively to answer back any opinion expressed in public” (Habermas 1991/1962, 249). Does this not sound like the rhetoric of the early Internet as a harbinger of democracy?⁸ Why, then, impose on such a technology (if it is indeed neutral and re-usable) the same structure of mass media that Habermas had charged with the ruinous deformation of the public sphere sixty years prior? We argue that an answer to this question is found less in the *structures* of the media in question – after all, they share more than a few qualities concerning their relation to the public sphere – and more in their relationship to the development of capitalism during the twentieth century.

6. The Paradox of Public Service Media

Let us address a potential refutation of our portrayal of Habermas’ critique of mass media: What if he is talking about privately owned media? After all, both he and the *PSMIM* call for the restructuring of the Internet not after the template of privately owned networks but after that of de-privatised Public Service Media. These are not arms of a state apparatus, but a mainstream alternative to commercial broadcasting whose goals of pluralism, regional representation, accessibility, and information transcend those of mere profit. Habermas can indeed be credited with an ambivalent view of mass media. Especially in his later work, he repeatedly advocates for the retention of Public Service Media and the strengthening of a “quality press” that takes responsibility for allowing citizens to engage in informed discourse. This differentiation would mean that the mass media paradigm possesses two versions, only one of which is deemed detrimental to deliberative democracy.

There are two counterarguments to this point, for which our reflections on technology form the basis. First, Habermas’ argument is nonetheless media ontological. By focusing on the “Don’t talk back” communicative situation, he criticises private as much as public service media – both are based on a top-down structure, although the goals to which this structure is put differ between the two. Second, Habermas himself relates his criticism of mass media to the early stages of Public Service Broadcasting. He notes that, compared to the “journalism of private men of letters” (Habermas 1991/1962, 188), mass media’s technological reach, ideological influence, and economic concentration were quickly deemed too great to be left to private corporations:

“Indeed, their capital requirements seemed so gigantic and their publicist power so threatening that in some countries the establishment of these media was from the start under government direction or under government control. Nothing characterized the development of the press and of the more recent media more conspicuously than these measures: they turned private institutions of a public composed of private people into public corporations (*öffentliche Anstalten*)” (Habermas 1991/1962, 187).

Early on, mass media’s concentration of wealth and information in the hands of private oligopolies was counteracted through state intervention. With the notable exception of the United States, this intervention was undertaken particularly in France, Germany, and Great Britain, where “these new media were organized into public or semipublic corporations, because otherwise their publicist function could not have been

⁸ Indeed, the Internet is often explicitly commended for its *overcoming* of mass media, see Pfister and Yang 2018, 252; Bedal 2004, 38; and Curran 2012, 3.

sufficiently protected from the encroachment of their capitalistic one” (Habermas 1991/1962, 188). It is here that we encounter the paradox of Public Service Media in relation to the public sphere. Setting aside for a moment Habermas’ media-ontological critique, the increased reach of mass media meant an expansion of the public sphere. This expansion meant that more people could partake in democratic deliberation. However, the concentration that went along with this expansion necessitated state intervention to ensure its democratic use. For Habermas, this intervention stands in conflict with the public sphere, in which “institutions of the public engaged in rational-critical debate were protected from interference by public authority by virtue of their being in the hands of private people” (188). But it is this being in the hands of private people that made state intervention necessary in the first place. In other words, the more effective an institution becomes in terms of democratic publicity, the more susceptible it becomes to private interests. The state tries to mitigate this susceptibility by turning mass media into Public Service Media, but by intervening, it administers the *per definitionem* unadministered public sphere. Paradoxically, the attempt to democratise is itself deemed undemocratic. Even the attempt to ‘repurpose’ or ‘restructure’ mass media, to use their technology against its poisonous tendency of concentration in the name of quality press, is inimical to will-formation and discussion. Does this not mean that the very *mission* of Public Service Media stands in conflict with the liberal public sphere and its notion of deliberative democracy?

The *PSMIM* is also not immune to this paradox. As laid out by its foundational principles, the Public Service Internet necessitates its independence from private corporations and the state. Fuchs argues in a different work that it was through the involvement of both that the digital public sphere has “been colonised and feudalised. We can then speak of an alienated digital sphere and alienated communication but not of a digital public sphere” (Fuchs 2021a, 13)⁹. Similar to Habermas’ condemnation of net oligopolies as a distortion rather than the logical consequence of the deregulated flow of digital communication, Fuchs envisions the Internet as a neutral technology that was later territorialised against its will. Despite a difference of almost sixty years, the intermediary position between capital and the state thus occupied by an *uncolonised* digital public sphere is strikingly similar to the one Habermas ascribes to the bourgeois public sphere in 1962 (Fuchs 2020, 217). We have already questioned the blind eye turned to historical media specificity contained in this correlation. But what is equally left open is the development of the relationship between democracy and capitalism that traverses the same period. Neither democracy nor the state (nor even capitalism) fulfil the same functions as they did in the liberal public sphere. How, then, can the digital public sphere be modelled after its bourgeois predecessor? It seems that the imposition of one paradigm onto another applies not only to the media side of deliberative democracy but also to its political one.

The paradox of Public Service Media adds another layer to the dubious use of deliberative democracy and mass media as ideals of an alternative Internet. Restructuring the commercial Internet after the template of mass media already becomes questionable when the same criticisms launched against the Internet – pseudo-public spheres, consumerism, privatism, and encumbered communication – are used against mass media. When further contextualised within the development of capitalism, however, these criticisms become visible as belonging to a much larger transformation in the relationship between state democracy and capital. Just as there is, on the level of

⁹ This rhetoric of colonisation – itself derived from Habermas’ “colonization of the lifeworld” – appears repeatedly in the discourse of digital capitalism, see e.g., McChesney 2013, xii, 97.

media theory, no going back to a public sphere before the Internet, there is, on the level of political economy, no going back to a public sphere before private and political colonisation.

7. Capitalism and Mass Democracy

The paradox of Public Service Media points beyond itself to the broader relationship between democracy and capitalism. To map out this relationship as it pertains to digital capitalism, we will now analyse the socio-political developments effaced by the trans-historical idealisation of a 'stable' public sphere implied by Habermas and the *PSMIM*. We will use Habermas' own works (1962, 1973, 1981) as guiding points.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the state intervention that paved the way for Public Service Media forms part of a "dialectic of a progressive 'societalization' of the state [which] simultaneously with an increasing 'stateification' of society gradually destroyed the basis of the bourgeois public sphere – the separation of state and society" (Habermas 1991/1962, 142). From this dialectic emerges a "re-politicized social sphere in which state and societal institutions fused into a single functional complex that could no longer be differentiated according to criteria of public and private" (148). Habermas' criticism of pseudo-public spheres is not limited to media; it is tied to a historical politicisation of capitalism that Friedrich Pollock (1941) analysed as *state capitalism* and that Habermas (1973) would later call *late capitalism*. Mass media's concentration of power becomes visible, therefore, as a microcosm of a much larger discordance:

"Under conditions of free competition and independent prices, then, no one was expected to be able to gain so much power as to attain a position that gave him complete control over someone else. Contrary to these expectations, however, [...] social power became concentrated in private hands. [...] The more society became transparent as a mere nexus of coercive constraints, the more urgent became the need for a strong state" (Habermas 1991/1962, 144).

Faced with the atrophy of monopoly capitalism, the state is forced to expand its prior role as a *Nachtwächter*, attributed to it by its liberal interpretation. It takes over hitherto privately organised services – mass media are one such 'service,' dwarfed for example by the organisation of production, commodity exchange, or social labour. Without changing the capitalist nature of (re)production, the state takes on the role of the *ideal collective capitalist*. It seeks to improve the use and movement of accumulated capital while enforcing the laws of private ownership over the means of production. With this, politics and private economics forfeit their mutual independence – the deformation of the public sphere is thus the necessary consequence of the state's forcible bid to *maintain* capitalism against its auto-cannibalistic tendencies.

The title of Habermas' 1973 book *Legitimation Crisis* points to the new form of state crisis that emerges from this repoliticisation of the social sphere: "Genuine participation of citizens in the process of political will-formation [...], that is, substantive democracy, would bring to consciousness the contradiction between administratively socialized production and the continued private appropriation and use of surplus value" (Habermas 1992/1973, 36). The solution lies in the formalisation of democracy itself: "In order to keep this contradiction from being thematized, [...] the administrative system must be sufficiently independent of legitimating will-formation" (36). The locus of will-formation – the public sphere – must be severed from actual fiscal policy. Ironically, the public sphere's liberal claim to independence is thereby used against it – not, however,

by denying this claim but by maintaining its empty shell at a time when this independence has long been made structurally impossible. To nonetheless cling to the independence of the public sphere – as do Habermas and the *PSMIM* – means either to ignore this historical development or, at worst, to reproduce the ideology of late capitalism that maintains this independence to gloss over its own contradictions.

To untie its legitimising from its administrative system, late capitalism de-politicises the public sphere. As active participation cannot be disallowed without risking a crisis of legitimation, it must be reduced to a minimum: “The state must preserve for itself a residue of unconsciousness in order that there accrue to it from its planning functions no responsibilities that it cannot honor without overdrawing its accounts” (68). The citizen must be turned into a consumer of products only capital and state welfare can provide. What is needed is a mechanism of *filtration*. This leads us back to mass media:

“The political system produces mass loyalty in both a positive and a selective manner: positively through the prospect of making good on social-welfare programs, selectively through excluding themes and contributions from public discussion. This can be accomplished through a sociostructural filtering of access to the political public sphere, through a bureaucratic deformation of the structures of public communication, or through manipulative control of the flow of communication” (Habermas 1987/1981, 346).

In the second volume of *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1987/1981), from which this passage is taken, Habermas relates late capitalism’s apparatus of legitimation to his previous ontology of mass media as a poisoned form. The contradiction of mass democracy, i.e., the guarantee of universal suffrage faced with the *impossibility* of equal participation, is evacuated to the top-down structure of mass media, where “[p]ublicity in the sense of critical scrutiny of the state gave way to public relations, mass-mediated staged displays, and the manufacture and manipulation of public opinion” (Fraser 2018, 246). In a system in which everybody has gained the right to speak, a method needs to be contrived to deflect the majority of voices. Mass media offer a technological infrastructure for this “cleansing of political participation from any participatory content” (Habermas 1987/1981, 350), staging the citizen not as a deliberator but as a spectator.

8. From Late Capitalism to Digital Capitalism

The mass media paradigm is not *extrinsically* forced upon democratic deliberation. Rather, it is *intrinsically* adopted by it at a certain stage of capitalist development. Mass media did not *cause* the destruction of the public sphere as much as they lent a body to its destruction. This leads us to the final part of our analysis: What happens after the crisis of late capitalism? What happens when the forced marriage of democracy and capitalism approaches its neoliberal divorce, when the intertwinement of mass media and mass democracy is confronted by the Internet’s logic of communication and accumulation?

As pointed out by Wolfgang Streeck (2011, 2012, 2017), the borrowed time that had buttressed the balance struck between Fordist capitalism and democratic welfare finally ran out in the 1970s. With the saturation of consumer markets, capitalist firms and democratic governments alike embarked “on a desperate search for a new formula to overcome what threatened to be a fundamental crisis of capitalist political economy” (Streeck 2012, 30). Since late capitalism’s interdependence of capital and state, any economic crisis entails a political one – the crisis of Fordism thus possesses two sides:

the neoliberal reorganisation of state power and the restructuring of the dominant mode of production. We will now put these correlated developments into perspective to see what vision of democracy and media they give rise to. This will help us solidify the incongruities we have ascertained within the *PSMIM*s and Habermas' approaches to digital capitalism.

Neoliberalism's universalisation of market rationality, privatisation of public services, and offshoring of labour to the Global South (Brown 2005, 42) mean the subversion of the welfare state. This gives rise to what Colin Crouch terms *post-democracy*: "Post-industrial capitalism has therefore started to try to undo the deals made by its industrial predecessor and tear down the barriers to commercialization and commodification imposed by mid-twentieth century concepts of citizenship" (Crouch 2004, 83). When public and private becomes one, the citizen-as-consumer is reproduced at a higher level. Streeck characterises the new mode of accumulation that accompanies this development as one of *individualisation* (Streeck 2012, 31). The mass production of Fordism is superseded by the flexible specialisation of post-Fordism, made possible primarily by the electronic computer (Fuchs 2012, 431; Schiller 2014, 23; Staab 2019, 58; Stewart and Hartman 2020, 174). To push consumption beyond saturation, the individualisation of production is paralleled by the individualisation of needs. A new politics of consumption arises that intensifies late capitalism's nascent capitalisation of the socio-cultural sphere through the systematic commodification of personal identity.

Streeck relates this post-Fordist logic of accumulation to a weakening of social relations. Tellingly, he uses the Internet as an illustration: "Sociation by social media – Twitter, Facebook and the like – represents an extension of this trend, not least in that it offers these companies a further set of tools for highly individualized marketing" (2012, 36). The communicative situation of social media – the elevation from spectator to *prosumer*, the personalisation of user profiles via the quantification of behaviour – makes the commercial Internet an ideal infrastructure for the post-Fordist market logic (Staab and Thiel 2021, 290-292). If mass media lent a body to the late capitalist mode of Fordist mass production and consumption, then the Internet lends a body to the neoliberal mode of post-Fordist individualisation. Its technology is not neutral. But if mass democracy depended on mass media's paradigm of spectatorship to sustain its legitimating function under late capitalism, then what happens to mass democracy in digital capitalism, whose media paradigm is based on individualisation? Does this logic not inevitably clash with mass democracy's enforced spectatorial passivity?

Looking at Streeck, the short answer is yes. After all, his argument is also a media-political one. The standardisation of mass media cannot live up to the singularisation of digital technologies. Streeck relates the resulting waning interest in standardised Public Service Media in favour of individualised streaming options to the parallel erosion of mass democracy tied to the mass media paradigm. The neoliberal commercialisation of the lifeworld pushes onto citizens and states the idea that "only private firms would be able to satisfy the rising expectations of more exacting consumers for increased attention to their emerging wants, in particular for more customized products" (Streeck 2012, 37). Governments are encouraged to seek legitimation in the reproduction of individualisation. The state submits to its new role as just another service provider; it tries to meet expectations of a universalised market logic that are incommensurable with the structure of a democracy that has – over the past century – already castrated itself to postpone the cannibalistic nature of capitalism. With this doomed emulation, the state finally loses even the pretension of democratic legitimation. We side with Streeck when he concludes:

“Politics, therefore, cannot undergo the same re-engineering that capitalist firms and product ranges underwent after the Fordist era. [...] *There is a strong sense in which politics will always at its core remain structurally akin to mass production, and as a consequence compare unfavourably to the ease and freedom of choice in modern consumer markets*” (Streeck 2012, 42, our emphasis)

There is indeed a strong sense that the heyday of mass democracy not only coincided with the dominant mass media paradigm of that time but was structurally bound to it. For a formalised democratic system to work within advanced capitalism, citizens *must be* spectators. The public sphere’s independence must be maintained just enough to act as a legitimating base simultaneously undermined via an exclusionary system of top-down *filtration*. In our initial analysis of the *PSMIM* and Habermas, we ascertained that it is exactly this system of filtration that is corrupted by the commercial Internet. Now, however, we can see that the conclusion that both texts draw from this – the necessity for the Internet’s restructuring in the image of mass media – can be read as an atavistic attempt to reanimate an elapsed version of democracy by rekindling the mass media paradigm to which it was bound. It ignores that the post-Fordist mode of accumulation, to which the commercial Internet lends an infrastructure, results from the *crisis* of late capitalism’s mass media paradigm. To anachronistically reanimate this paradigm would not, therefore, evade but *reproduce* the parameters of the politico-economic crisis that has led us to the digital downfall of deliberative democracy. Moreover, to impose this paradigm onto the current Internet means to disregard that even if the Internet is not a technology that can be said to *enforce* a certain politics, it is nonetheless *inscribed* with one. Even if it did not trigger the crisis of Fordism, its communicative networks still ‘fit’ into the program of the post-Fordist flexibilisation of production (Schröter 2004, 286). Ultimately, the Internet lends a body to the neoliberal market logic that makes visible the structural impossibility of deliberative democracy in the Global North of the twenty-first century. Combined, these conclusions urge us to look for different strategies for counteracting the Internet’s anti-democratic tendencies, especially when taking into consideration the unexpected – unconscious – side effects that its technology may still harbour for the organisation of democratic politics as such.

9. Conclusion

Digital capitalism spells the downfall of deliberative democracy. *The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto* and *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* make convincing cases for the need to restructure the commercial Internet to create and safeguard communicative situations necessary for deliberation and participation. Their shared objective to model an alternative Internet after the template of broadcasting media is, however, fraught with several incongruities, which this paper hopes to have demonstrated. The key point that has led us to question their nevertheless commendable approaches can be formulated as follows: Instead of viewing the commercial Internet as a cause of the decline of democracy, it should be comprehended as *born from the same logic of accumulation* that has brought to the fore the inherent contradiction between democracy and capital. In transforming the experiential parameters of democracy, digital capitalism has made painfully visible the *spectatorial role* forced upon citizens a long time ago. When this role – tied as it was to mass media – was then superseded by new media’s *prosumer*, the depoliticisation of the public sphere bestowed by late capitalism upon its neoliberal heir is transformed into a reflexive mode of accumulation. The hollow shell of audience democracy begets a new politics of consumption that finds its catalyst in the

communicative situation of the Internet. Mass media cannot, therefore, function as a template for the democratisation of the Internet – they were just better at camouflaging the capitalist crisis of democracy later exacerbated by digital capitalism.

What, then, are other, less contentious, alternatives for the Internet's restructuring? The findings of this paper point less towards an answer than to the ineffectiveness of the question itself. Does not our conclusion that digital capitalism is born from the same logic of accumulation that has brought to the fore the contradiction of democracy and capital mean that its restructuring must coincide with a restructuring of democracy itself? Throughout this paper, we have criticised the use of the liberal public sphere and mass media as ideals of democracy – why not regard representative democracy too as an unattainable ideal? The more radical continuation of this argument would be to look for organisational forms beyond 'democracy' as we know it to act as a gauge for a socially beneficial Internet, found e.g., in the theories of 'polycentric governance' (Ostrom 2010) – a path not taken but certainly akin to our analysis.

There is no simple 'going back' to a form of democracy whose gap between ideal and reality has outgrown our lived experience of democratic politics under digital capitalism. The commercial Internet has changed what democracy looks like, but maybe it has also changed what democracy ought to be. A solution for the Internet must also be a solution for democracy. Instead of asking how to restructure the Internet to strengthen democracy, it may be more effective to ask how to restructure democracy *in relation to* the Internet. Could the capitalist castration of democracy be counteracted by the conception of new governmental institutions modelled after the Internet's participatory power (Gardels and Berggruen 2019, 35)? Could the toxicity of current Internet communication be defused by abstracting from its commodification of individuality a new invigoration of direct or plebiscitary democracy, a new 'design,' in Feenberg's sense, beyond representative democracy?

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