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# Democracy, the Internet, and Capitalism: A Reply to Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter

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**Abstract:** This paper is a reply to Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter's essay "On a Potential Paradox of Public Service Media" which is part of *tripleC*'s special issue "Critical Perspectives on Digital Capitalism: Theories and Praxis". My reflections focus on the notion of filtering, the relationship between broadcasting and the Internet; the relationship of media, technology, and society; and questions of (digital) democracy. On the one hand, there is a number of points where I agree with Korn and Schröter. On the other hand, their reflections also raised questions that I point out and that are not answered in their paper.

**Keywords:** democracy, capitalism, Internet, Jürgen Habermas, *Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto*

## 1. Introduction

I appreciate that Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter have written interesting and thoughtful reflections on the *Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto* (PSMI Manifesto Collective 2021). The *Manifesto* was co-authored by a group of around 50 people in a deliberative process. Thus far it has been endorsed by more than 1,300 individuals (see http://bit.ly/psmmanifesto). Although I together with Klaus Unterberger had the idea for the *Manifesto* and co-ordinated its creation, I cannot speak for others involved in the process who have diverse backgrounds, motivations, and perspectives. What I am saying in this response is therefore my own perspective and is not necessarily shared by everyone who was involved in the production of the *Manifesto* or who signed it.

The *Manifesto* process emerged as an idea that Klaus Unterberger and I had in the kick-off phase of the ESCR (Economic and Social Research Council) project "InnoPSM: Innovation in Public Service Media Policies" (see https://innopsm.net) that was led by Alessandro D'Arma and Minna Horowitz. The idea was that it is important to as part of the project's engagement with Public Service Media (PSM) also focus on utopias and the future. The idea resulted in one project domain called "PSM Utopias" that led to the creation of the *Manifesto*. We became convinced that thinking about the future of PSM is connected to thinking about the future of the Internet. The whole *Manifesto* process has included the Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Utopias Survey conducted by Christian Fuchs, workshops, public talks, intense debate and deliberation, events, the co-creation process of the *Manifesto* that involved many contributors, the launch and debate of the *Manifesto*, etc. The creation of the *Manifesto* was a form of what Ernst and Schröter (2021) term imagining future media, i.e., "*imagining future possibilities*" of the media (43). We are not claiming that the Public Service Internet is the only feasible or necessary future of the Internet. There are many important progressive possibilities and futures of society, the media, and the Internet whose realisations can only in a co-operative effort challenge the power of the digital giants and digital capitalism. What the creators of the *Manifesto* ascertain is that we

also in the future require (transformed) Public Service Media for a vivid and democratic public sphere that escapes capitalist, bureaucratic and ideological colonisation (see Fuchs 2023). The uncolonized public sphere is not, as Korn and Schröter write, an "intermediary position between capital and the state" but a democratic-socialist vision and struggle against colonisation. It is possible to establish spaces with relative autonomy in and against capitalist society, but full autonomy requires a democratic and socialist framework of society.

Besides Noam Chomsky, Jürgen Habermas certainly is the *Manifesto*'s most prominent endorser. That Habermas endorses the *Manifesto* does, however, not imply that the *Manifesto* shares Habermas' theoretical assumptions and arguments. While Habermas' works that Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter discuss, such as *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, *Technology and Science as "Ideology"*, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, etc., are theoretical works, the *Manifesto* is a political statement and demand. It is therefore difficult to draw analogies between Habermas' theory and the *Manifesto*. The *Manifesto* outlines a political vision, not a theory, and makes political demands. Korn and Schröter's article primarily makes a theoretical argument but does not formulate a political vision.

The *Manifesto*'s endorsers, including Habermas, agree that the dominant version of the Internet, its societal contexts, and its dominant platforms such as Google/YouTube, Facebook/Instagram, TikTok, Baidu, Twitter, etc. pose threats to democracy and that we, therefore, require alternatives. Those engaged in and supporting the *Manifesto* group certainly come from different political backgrounds such as radical socialism, social democracy, liberalism, the green movement, the human rights movement, the privacy and data protection movement, consumer protectionism, etc. There are probably no fascists and right-wing extremists among the supporters as such groups and individuals oppose democracy and Public Service Media. What unites many of the supporters of the *Manifesto* is the opposition to fascism and the insight that the rise of new fascisms threatens democracy as such and that, therefore, we need to unite across political boundaries in anti-fascist struggles to safeguard democracy.

My reply proceeds by focusing on the following topics: filters (section 2), broadcasting and the Internet (section 3), media, technology, and society (section 4), democracy (section 5), and finally drawing some conclusions (section 6).

## 2. Filters

Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter write that Habermas (2022) in his recent essay on the digital transformation of the public sphere and the *Manifesto* argues that "true democratic deliberation" requires "principles of filtration" that are "imposed upon the Internet" so that the latter is "remodelled after the template of broadcast media".

*The Manifesto* does not use the terms "filter" or "filtering". It also does not outline ideas for specific platforms and platform designs. Rather, it speaks of, for example, "public funding" (PSMI Manifesto Collective 2021, 11), "independence" (11), "diversity" (11), "new opportunities for participation" (12), "shared collective resources" (12), "new forms of popular participation" (13), decentralised data storage (13), "new ideas, new technologies, new policies, and new economic models" (14), "the cultural and digital commons for not-for-profit and non-commercial purposes" (13), etc. The question of what to do and how to deal with fascist, racist, anti-Semitic, etc. content and comments that are uploaded to a public platform is not addressed in the *Manifesto*. Certainly, this is a problem that needs to be dealt with. For example, requiring users to register via their licence fee ID removes anonymity and practices a real name policy can disincentivise the public communication of hate speech, which does not undo its causes. The

basic problem of hate speech is the economic, political, and ideological polarisation of society, which implies that it will only disappear when we overcome society's fundamental contradictions. The *Manifesto* itself does not address questions of filtering, censorship, etc.

Habermas (2022) writes about the need for "editorial filters" (159), "professional filters" (159), and "more or less *informed pluralism of opinion* filtered by the media system gives every citizen the opportunity to form his or her *own* opinion and to make *an election decision* that, from his or her point of view, is *rationally motivated*" (Habermas 2023, 151). What he thereby means is that media organisations and journalists have to decide what is included and left out in a report. In the case of tabloid media reports, state-controlled and censored media, etc., such decisions result in biased, censored, manipulated, sensationalist, one-sided, etc. information.

Habermas' understanding of "filtering" is certainly different from Herman and Chomsky's (1988/2002) filters of the media whereby they mean the manipulation of information by media concentration, capitalist orientation, advertising, lobbying, disciplining and control of the media, and ideology in order to try to manufacture consent, which involves to "marginalize dissent" and "allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public" (Herman and Chomsky 1988/2002, 2). Habermas' use of the term filtering may be unfortunate and not enough defined, but he thereby certainly does not mean and does not argue in favour of the control of the media by capitalist interests, bureaucracy, politics, the state, or ideology.

## 3. Broadcasting and the Internet

Elisabeth Kern and Jens Schröter write that Habermas and the *Manifesto* argue for the "mere remodelling of the Internet after the template of broadcasting media". They basically say that the goal is to create Internet platforms where there is only one sender and many receivers and to model the Internet on traditional radio and television. I have three comments on this issue.

*First*, I do not recognise the broadcasting argument in the *Manifesto*. *Second,* the two author's argument seems to be based on the assumption that the contemporary Internet is radically different from broadcasting. But although on the Internet and "social media", consumers and audiences can become Internet prosumers and producers of information (user-generated content), many Internet users for the majority of their online time use platforms as audiences and only rarely or never engage in user-generated content production.

In a global survey of Internet users, 90.9% of the responding Internet users said they watch videos on a video streaming platform at least once a month (We Are Social & Meltwater 2023, 96). In contrast, a much smaller share of Internet users says it engaged in user-generated content production. 11 per cent of the users in a survey said they make memes or gifs, 6 per cent said they make a podcast, and 6 per cent said they write a blog or online articles (Ofcom 2023).

Although the Internet and social media have affordances that enable users to engage in content production so that these platforms are qualitatively different from traditional broadcast media, usage practices are not entirely different from the broadcasting age. There is a relatively small group of Internet profiles and users, including so-called "influencers"/"creators" and traditional media organisations and celebrities, whose online content reaches millions of users, attracts high visibility, and results in a large number of "likes". In contrast, everyday users tend to have low visibility and a small number of followers. There are new inequalities and power structures on the Internet. The creators' power of visibility is especially achieved via multichannel

networks, which are special marketing agencies that focus on selling product placement in creators' videos and images to brands. The world of user-generated content thereby reproduces power inequalities, capitalism, and consumer culture in new forms (Fuchs 2021, 2024b). Online echo chambers, the spread of fake news, and influencer capitalism online are manifestations of structures dominated by capitalism, the logic of accumulation, individualism, polarisation, and postmodern fragmentation,

*Third*, I get the impression that the authors assume that Public Service Media (PSM) can only be based on a broadcast model of the media. For example, they write: "Both [the Manifesto and Habermas] argue that the Internet needs to be restructured after the template of traditional broadcasting media, more specifically Public Service Media, to safeguard democracy". If one defines PSM in a media-centric manner as a version of broadcast media, then this is certainly the case. But if one defines PSM based on political economy so that they are conceived as media that are publicly owned, not-for-profit, are independent from the state, capital, and ideology, and have a democratic public service remit (Fuchs 2024a, chapters 12 & 13; Splichal 2007, 255; Splichal 2012, 102), then the form of communication that PSM support can be conceived as variable, dynamic, and developing. I do not see why it should not be possible for PSM to run non-commercial, not-for-profit Internet platforms that compete with YouTube, TikTok, etc. and go beyond the broadcast model of communication.

The *Manifesto* explicitly says (as Korn and Schröter acknowledge): "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" (PSMI Collective 2021, 14). The Public Service Internet builds on the best elements of Public Service Media and goes beyond it. This means a Hegelian *Aufhebung* (sublation) that eliminates, preserves, and elevates at the same time, not a copying of broadcasting and traditional PSM. Public Service Media (PSM) is not necessarily a broadcast model of communication(s). When there is an *Aufhebung*, one cannot claim that the vision of the *Manifesto* is "a mere remodelling of the Internet after the template of broadcasting media". I do not recognise the argument in the Manifesto that "the Internet needs to be restructured after the template of traditional broadcasting media".

PSM certainly need reforms, such as a self-managed structure where audience members and workers play a decisive role. Such reforms are all viable, feasible, possible, and needed without the destruction of Public Service Media organisations. It is mainly far-right-wing forces who today argue for the destruction of PSM and question their need for democracy. I doubt that is an agenda that Korn and Schröter share. It is not clear if the two authors' ideal media model is simply based on the generalisation of user-generated content that results in a plurality of information without any unity and general basis of communication. Are journalists simply an outflow of an outdated mass media model characteristic of Fordism that should be abolished in a future society? Does a free, democratic, socialist society no longer need journalism? Does it not need a *sublation*, i.e., radical reform of journalism as we know it? I doubt that professional media work and journalism can and should disappear.

## 4. Media, Technology, and Society

Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter argue that both Habermas's works and the *Manifesto* are based on a neutral concept of technology. They write that both Habermas and *Manifesto* see the Internet as "neutral" and assume that 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"; that both see the Internet

as "a sufficiently neutral technology, not inherently poisoned by the capitalist circumstances of its conception" so that it can be made democratic without societal changes merely by "the imposition of a mass media paradigm"; and that "Fuchs envisions the Internet as a neutral technology that was later territorialised against its will".

I do not agree with this view of the *Manifesto* and my academic works. The *Manifesto* does not postulate a theoretical concept of the relationship between communication technologies and society. At least to me, it is evident that it argues for the need to both transform society and redesign technology. For example, it says that "the Public Service Internet requires new ideas, new technologies, new policies, and new economic models" (PSMI Manifesto Collective 2021, 14), which for me means the creation of models of the media and society beyond capitalism. Envisioning the Internet and PSM in 2040, the *Manifesto* not only speaks of new Internet platforms but also assumes societal transformations have taken place that involve "a new, radical governance structure" (16) and a world beyond "the corporate digital giants" (15). For me, it is clear that such developments require and are political and economic changes so that the struggle for a Public Service Internet is part of struggles for the strengthening of the commons and public services in society. An alternative, democratic, non-capitalist Internet requires and helps advance "a democratic, sustainable, fair, just, and resilient society" (9). For me, this means that a democratic Internet requires a democratic socialist society as its foundation, which does not imply that such a political economy and form of governance automatically produce better, more democratic, and fairer forms and means of communication, but that such structures are a good foundation that is conducive to democratic communication(s).

The *Manifesto* does not offer a political blueprint of what societal transformations are needed. Maybe that is what Korn and Schröder are missing in it. For me, such transformations include the advancement of the commons and the public good as well as the weakening of the logic of capital, the logic of accumulation, and the logic of authoritarianism, i.e., the advancement of socialist democracy and democratic socialism. The *Manifesto* aims at a broad coalition of democratic forces, so is not oriented on one particular worldview, movement, or pathway. One aspect that unites the creators and endorsers of the *Manifesto* is the insight that democracy, namely any type of democracy, is under threat today and that fascist forces are on the rise throughout the world. We can passionately argue about what model of democracy is the best one and what democracy we need, how democratic or undemocratic the Internet is and can be, what kind of democracy Public Service Media can and should sustain, etc. But when democracy as such comes under threat, then all those committed to the varieties of democratic models, need to unite in order to defend the very idea of democracy against fascism. If they do not unite, then we might see the very end of any kind of democracy and perhaps, if the existing antagonisms escalate, the end of humanity and life on Earth as such.

Habermas has not written much on the relationship of technology to society. In his later works, there is no clear understanding of technology. The most direct engagement with technology in society is the essay *Technology and Science as "Ideology"* (Habermas 1987a) which Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter discuss critically. They criticise that Habermas in this work and in general conceives of technology as "an anthropological feature" and that he opposes Marcuse who argues for a "different technology" under transformed societal conditions.

In general, I agree with this criticism of Habermas and have myself been influenced by Marcuse's understanding of technology (see Fuchs 2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2016a). When I started teaching philosophy and sociology of technology at Vienna University

of Technology in 2000, Marx's and Marcuse's writings on technology became my most important sources. Marcuse argues that technological transformation "is at the same time political transformation" and that the development of "a new technology" requires "qualitative social change" (Marcuse 1964, 227; see also Marcuse 1941 & Marcuse 2001, 37-57).

I think we need to further accentuate the criticism of Habermas' (1987a) understanding of technology. Habermas does not just see technology as an anthropological feature of society. More than that, he sees technology necessarily as a form of instrumental reason and technological rationality as an anthropological feature of society. His concept of technology is dualistic and undialectical. He opposes labour and interaction as two fundamentally different societal phenomena that, according to him, exist in all societies.

*Technology and Science as "Ideology"* is a critique of Marcuse's understanding of technology. Habermas argues that a new technology is not possible because technology, in his view, "can only be traced back to a 'project' of the human species as *a whole*, and not to one that could be historically surpassed" (Habermas 1987a, 87). Arguing that technology is part of all societies is not problematic as such. The problem, however, starts when Habermas defines technology as necessarily shaped by instrumental reason so that he ends up naturalising the existence of domination. For Habermas, "instrumental action is governed by *technical rules* based on empirical knowledge" (91-92). He opposes labour, instrumental action, and technology on the one side to interaction, communicative action, and social norms on the other (92-93). The table that he introduces in the essay (Habermas 1987a, 93) draws a dualistic distinction between symbolic interaction on the one side and systems on the other side, or, as Habermas said later, between lifeworld and systems (Habermas 1984, 1987b). For Habermas, technology is entirely situated on the side of systems, domination, and instrumental reason. He thereby categorically rules out the existence of alliance technologies (Bloch 1995, chapter 37), convivial technologies (Illich 1973), and technologies of co-operation that are not based on instrumental reason but on the logic of the commons and the common good. Establishing such technologies requires, as Marcuse stresses, proper societal transformations.

Habermas (1987a, 105) explicitly speaks of a "dualism of work and interaction". He lacks a dialectical understanding of both technology and communication. He situates communication on the side of emancipation, liberation, and freedom, whereby he overlooks that communication plays an important role in the organisation and legitimation of exploitation and domination (Fuchs 2016a, 2020a). An important insight of Habermas' essay that we can and should certainly build on is the insight that technology and science "today also take on the function of legitimating political power" (Habermas 1987a, 101), which helps to ground a critique of technological determinism and technocracy.

For Habermas, technology is not neutral, but inherently and necessarily shaped by domination. In his works, he has largely left open the question if he sees the possibility for alternative, democratic media and communications that are not shaped by the systemic logics of capital and domination. Given he supports the *Manifesto*, it looks like today he sees such a possibility. His concept of technology has remained rudimentary. His works on the system/lifeworld and work/interaction dualisms do not provide a theoretical underpinning of a notion of democratic means and technologies of communication. I do, however, think we must argue against, with, and beyond Habermas. Habermas is not dogmatic. He changes his approach based on the interaction with other approaches. I do see elements in his theory, especially his early notion of the public

sphere, that can be combined with the notion of democratic means of communication (see Fuchs 2023).

There is a dialectic of technology and society. In antagonistic societies, technologies take on antagonistic features. In capitalism, technology is embedded into and part of what Marx termed the antagonism between the productive forces and the relations of production. The Internet is part of a capitalist antagonism between the networked and digital productive forces and class and dominative relations (Fuchs 2011, 2016b). Exploitation, expropriation, and domination are just one side of digital capitalism. Digital technologies are ambivalent and through the antagonistic development of the productive forces and the relations of production also advance the socialisation of work and increase the co-operative character of life and society.

In digital capitalism, there is an antagonism between networked digital productive forces and class relations. Networked digital technologies create new forms of commodification and exploitation, and new problems for accumulation. However, digital information as a commodity also has features that resist commodification. Digital capitalism is grounded in an antagonism between digital commons and digital commodities. Digitalisation shapes, and is shaped by, the "antagonism between the social co-operation of the proletariat and the (economic and political) command of capital" (Negri 2017, 25; see also Negri 2019 & Fuchs 2019a, 2019b).

Reading Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter's essay, I get the impression that they at certain points in the essay think of both broadcasting and the Internet as always and necessarily shaped by the logic of domination and exploitation. For the two authors, the mass media are an intrinsic feature of "a certain stage of capitalist development", namely late capitalism. And they see the Internet as intrinsically tied to "the neoliberal mode of post-Fordist individualisation". They ask: "But what if the media structure of digital communication, irrespective of who owns or controls it, denies its democratic instrumentalisation?", which implies that there can be no democratic digital communication. The implication is that it is not possible to transform and democratise the Internet, also not under a different societal framework. This view is, however, contradicted by other statements. For example, the two authors write: "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". On the one hand, they here agree that an alternative, democratic Internet is possible. On the other hand, they present technology as neutral.

I agree with Korn and Schröter's emphasis on Langdon Winner's (1980; 1986, 19-39) insight that technologies are inscribed with politics and are more or less embedded into and shaped by domination. I do, however, not think this allows us to speak of "more neutral" and "less neutral" technologies. Technology is always embedded into, shaped by, and shaping society, which implies, as Raymond Williams (1975) stressed in his critique of Marshall McLuhan's techno-determinism, that the development and the use of technology are shaped by social, political, and economic interests and contradictions. Winner (1986, 38) says that there are technologies that are political because their "design or arrangement" establishes "patterns of power and authority in a given setting" and that there are technologies that are political because their properties are "strongly, perhaps unavoidably, linked to particular institutionalized patterns of power and authority". For Winner (1986), the implication is that technologies are not "neutral tools" (25). "[C]onditions of power, authority, freedom, and social justice are deeply embedded in technical structures. From this standpoint, no part of modern

technology can be judged neutral a priori. All varieties of hardware and their corresponding forms of social life must be scrutinized to see whether they are friendly or unfriendly to the idea of a just society" (Winner 1986, 40).

I also agree with Korn and Schröter that the "commercial Internet" is not the "cause of the decline of democracy", but that it was "*born from the* […] *logic of accumulation*". I have added in my work that there is not just the economic logic of capital accumulation but also other forms of accumulation. The political accumulation of power and military confrontations such as the Second World War in the case of the computer and the Cold War in the case of the Internet have just like the accumulation of capital been important contexts of the development of digital technologies. The rise of the Internet and the personal computer were situated in the context of the economic, political, ideological, and societal crisis of Fordist, Keynesian capitalism. They were at the same time medium and outcome of the rise of post-Fordist, neoliberal, global capitalism. But although contemporary technology is deeply embedded into capitalist structures, it just like capitalism itself has an antagonistic character and therefore also features social forms that in antagonistic manners are not or not-yet subsumed under capitalism and transcend or even resist capitalist logic with all sorts of problems attached to such a negation of the negation.

I do not envision, as Korn and Schröter claim, "the Internet as a neutral technology that was later territorialised against its will". Rather, I think there are antagonistic forces at play in capitalist society where the process of the subsumption under capital on the one side and the resistance against and opposition to the logic of accumulation on the other side compete. Antagonisms between commodification and commonification, domination and self-management, ideology and recognition, etc. have shaped digital technologies in capitalist society from the start (Fuchs 2008). There is not a pure, neutral technology that is first born innocently and then becomes subsumed. Rather, technologies in class societies emerge in antagonistic contexts and reflect antagonisms in complex and transfigured manners.

Technology is not neutral because it is always embedded into and shaped by structures of society. However, such structures are often antagonistic, which also makes contemporary technology antagonistic. As a consequence, the Internet has both and at the same time potentials for mediating exploitation and domination and advancing the logic of the commons. The logic of capital and the logic of domination are designed into platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Google which are surveillance media and media for the exploitation of users' unpaid digital labour. Although marginal, the world of digital media is also the home of non-capitalist projects such as Wikipedia, Creative Commons, diamond open access publishing, free software, platform co-operatives, etc. that have post-capitalist, digital socialist potentials (Fuchs 2020b). Given they too cannot act outside of capitalist society, such projects face specific antagonisms and limits. The basic task of progressive tech politics is to advance radical reforms of society that establish decommodified, unideological, non-dominative spaces and projects that have resources that allow them to become powerful. Having a non-commercial and not-for-profit character certainly is not enough. Also *Russia Today* is a not-for-profit project but is at the same time ideological, authoritarian, and state-controlled. Emancipation does not halt at the level of the economy but is a matter of society as a whole.

Capitalism contains certain seeds of socialism that need to be sublated (*aufgehoben*) in progressive manners. The world of digital technologies, as Marcuse knew, does not simply have to be abolished and created anew; it needs to be sublated, eliminated, preserved, and elevated at the same time. Marcuse stresses in this context that

democratic socialism needs to build on and transform those forms of technology that already exist today and are "creating the prerequisites for the free use of free time" (Marcuse 2001, 39-40). Some aspects of capitalist technologies can be liberating and should continue to be used in a socialist society, whereas others need a redesign, again other technologies should no longer be used because they harm humans and/or nature, and new ones need to be invented. At the same time there is no guarantee that socialist technologies will not adopt a capitalist character and harm humans and/or nature, so that redesign is and will remain a constant challenge. Capitalist technologies can contain socialist *Keimformen* (germ forms, see Meretz 2009, 2019; Sutterlütti and Meretz 2023) and socialist technologies can contain the potential to turn into class technologies.

In the end, it looks to me that Korn/Schröter and I are not so far apart on the matters discussed and that we agree on quite some aspects such as the non-neutrality of technology, the dialectic of society and technology, technology's antagonistic character in capitalism, the need for democratic communications that requires a dialectic of societal and technological transformations, etc.

In another publication that emerged from an interesting project on the society after money that Jens Schröter led (https://nach-dem-geld.de/), Jasmin Kathöfer and Jens Schröter (2019, 365) start by positively acknowledging Hartmut Winkler's (2004, 29) observation that digital technologies remind us of the antagonism between productive forces and relations of production that Marx identified. They argue that beyond capitalist markets and state-planned economies, there is a third alternative, namely an economy and a society based on "*decentralized* planning" where the "decentralized collection, processing and distribution of information could take place using data networks" (Kathöfer and Schröter 2019, 370). "A society of participatory, informed, democratic and timely collective planning would require fast, varied and interactive communicative platforms where proposals could be circulated, responded to, at length or briefly, trends identified, reputations established, revisions and amendments generated, and so on. It would, in short, demand that Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Flickr and other Web 2.0 platforms not only themselves become operations self-managed by their workers (including their unpaid prosumer contributors), but also become fora for planning" (375). Sutterlütti and Meretz (2023) and Gerdes et al. (2023) outline and simulate a post-capitalist societal framework they term commonism, an idea formulated earlier on by authors such as Nick Dyer-Witheford and Susan Buck-Morrs (2013) (for a discussion of this concept, see also Fuchs 2021, 2020a, 2019a, 2019c, 2017). Schröter (2021) adds to these debates that post-capitalism has not only but also a technological dimension. "The question of post-capitalism is also the question of technology" (Schröter 2021, 11).

How I read the *Manifesto* is that it suggests that some of the alternative, democratic Internet platforms we need for post-capitalist transition should be operated by Public Service Media and other public organisations. I do not agree that "the *Manifesto* is not about post-capitalism". For me, the vision the *Manifesto* outlines is a necessary (though not sufficient) part of the transition to a democratic-socialist Internet in a democratic-socialist society.

Public Service Internet platforms are not the only thing we need. Other alternatives should be organised as platform co-operatives. Yet others should be joint "ventures" of public organisations and co-operatives (public/commons partnerships instead of public/private partnerships), etc. The pathways towards post-capitalism are difficult and require experimenting with different social forms and projects. Civil society projects and co-operatives often face the problems of marginalisation, self-exploitative

precarious labour, and resource precarity (see Fuchs 2021, chapter 15; Fuchs and Sandoval 2015; Sandoval 2020, 2016a, 2016b, Sandoval and Fuchs 2010). Therefore, above all, such projects need to be underpinned by a radical politics that channels resources and frees up time and space for non-capitalist, democratic projects so that the latter escape their all-too-frequent marginality and precarity and can challenge the dominant capitalist organisations, projects, social forms, platforms, etc.

In contemporary society, the struggle for post-capitalism faces an additional problem: the rise of new forms of fascism. If the latter becomes dominant and stronger, we may in the future no longer be able to discuss what kind of society we want to establish, what sort of democracy we need, how the common good, the commons and the public services can be strengthened, etc. The biggest danger we face today is that the new fascists will embroil the world in a new World War and destroy everything. It is, therefore, a key political task to defend society and the idea of democracy against fascism. This task is called anti-fascism. In this context, the question arises of how one should best think about democracy.

## 5. Democracy

Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter rightly point out that the future of the Internet is first and foremost a question about the future of society. Talking about the Internet means talking about society. The future of society and the Internet is importantly a question about the future of the economy. The future is not simply just an economic question, but, as Korn and Schröter stress, a question about the future of politics and democracy. Political and economic questions are deeply entangled. Political economy matters (see Fuchs 2024a).

Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter say that Habermas' notion of deliberative democracy is "a liberal vision of democracy" and that "the liberal public sphere" is connected to the "notion of deliberative democracy". They argue that we need a "new invigoration of direct or plebiscitary democracy […] beyond representative democracy" for "Internet communication".

I agree that we need to, as Korn and Schröter say, "restructure democracy *in relation to* the Internet". But I think in some passages in Korn and Schröter's paper, they mix liberal, representative, and deliberative democracy and do not define and distinguish between direct and plebiscitary democracy. These models of democracy are not one and the same and I am wondering how the authors define them and distinguish them from one another.

The *Manifesto* is not simply associated with and an expression of liberal democracy. It does not specify a particular version of democracy it prefers, as there were about 50 people involved in authoring it. But there is certainly an inclination towards participatory democracy, deliberative democracy, and a combination of both. I cannot see an argument for liberal democracy in it although there are of course liberals who just like socialists, radical democrats etc. have supported and signed the *Manifesto* because they are concerned that contemporary political systems increasingly turn towards and into fascism. We must also remember, as Stuart Hall (1986) says, that there are various variants of liberalism, including progressive ones that go beyond neoliberalism. Such variants should be seen as political allies in the struggle against fascism. I do not see liberalism as the main enemy today. We need broad political alliances to stop (new) fascism. Neo-liberalism as a version of liberalism caused social and societal crises and in a negative dialectic turned against liberalism's political ideals, which helped the rise of new fascist movements. But fascism as politics is distinct from liberalism as it sees everything non-fascist as an enemy that should be eliminated.

Deliberative democracy has many variants and influences; it is not simply liberal democracy, as some of Korn and Schröter's formulations imply (for example, they write that Graham Murdock and Jürgen Habermas argue for the "revival of a liberal vision of democracy – based on the power of deliberation as the consensus-driven rule of the majority"). In David Held's (2006) book *Models of Democracy*, deliberative democracy is one of ten distinct models. In his book *Theories of Democracy*, Frank Cunningham (2002) discusses deliberative democracy as a distinct model of democracy. Habermas (1996a, chapter 7.1; 1996b) sees deliberative democracy as a third model of democracy that he distinguishes from liberal and republican models. Held (2006, 5) says that deliberative democracy has been influenced by classical democracy, republicanism, liberal democracy, direct democracy, and participatory democracy. Deliberative democracy has various versions.

I am curious to hear more about how Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter think of the role of plebiscites in society and how they imagine a plebiscitary Internet to work. Plebiscites have had realities beyond and against democracy. Think of the Nazis' 1933 plebiscite on leaving the League of Nations, the 1934 referendum on merging the posts of President and Chancellor, the 1936 referendum on the military occupation of the Rhineland, and the 1938 referenda on elections with a single list and the unification of Germany and Austria. In more recent political history, Brexit was the result of a referendum that was preceded by campaigns that were dominated by the charismatic, far-right leadership of Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson who, supported by the British right-wing tabloid press, engaged in constant racist sloganeering that blamed East European immigrants for the demise of the British welfare state and public services. In reality, the social crisis Britain faces is the result of more than forty years of never-ending Thatcherite neoliberalism. After Brexit, the United Kingdom certainly has not become a better place. To many, Farage and Johnson's empty promises have become unmasked as lies and ideology. I fear that a plebiscitary Internet will be a large-scale version of how Elon Musk imagines Twitter to work (see figure 1).
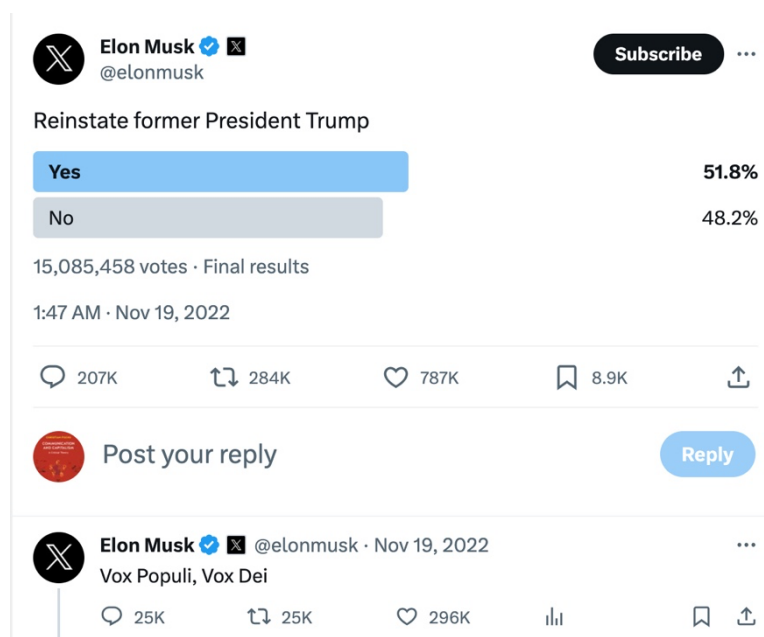


Figure 1: Elon Musk's understanding of democracy, source: fair use from https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1593767953706921985 (accessed on December 5, 2023)

Musk says that he is a fan of "direct democracy" where the "will of the people" is expressed by "direct votes which were not possible in the old days because you had to mail things around information moved very slowly. But in an electronic society where information moves instantly, you can represent very directly the rule of the people" (Philosophy Workout 2015). In November 2022, Musk on his Twitter account conducted a poll asking if Trump should be reinstated on Twitter. There was a bit over 15 million votes. 51.8 per cent voted in favour, 48.2 per cent against Musk's proposal. Therefore, Musk unbanned Trump's Twitter account @realdonaldtrump. Musk enabled Trump 2.0 on Twitter.

In Musk's understanding of politics, there is a fusion of economic and political power. It is he who asks the questions that his social media followers are supposed to vote on. In his version of free speech, far-right threats and hatred directed against the freedom of others are tolerated. For Musk, free speech, however, ends when he's criticised too heavily. In 2017, Richard Ortiz, who engaged in organising a union at a Tesla factory in California, was fired. In 2022, ZDF journalists who earlier on had reported critically on Tesla were excluded from the launch of Tesla's factory in Brandenburg. It is no surprise that progressive commentators say that "Elon Musk is a threat to democracy" (Heer 2023). How can we make sure that ideas of a plebiscitary Internet are not captured and realised by the likes of Elon Musk?

Korn and Schröter only speak of "direct or plebiscitary democracy" as the model of democracy they want to use for restructuring democracy after the Internet. They write about the "Internet's participatory power", which somehow without further differentiation reminds us of Henry Jenkin's problematic use of the term "participation" in his claim that the technological structure of the Internet advances what he calls a participatory culture, but they do not refer to the model of participatory democracy, which is a radical vision of democracy (see Macpherson 1973; Pateman 1970; Fuchs 2017, chapter 3).

Participatory democracy in contrast to plebiscites and direct democracy is not limited to voting and majority decisions but rather stresses aspects of co-operative ownership, self-management, and decision-making in many realms of society. It also points out that the political-economic context of democracy is crucial. We must take that context into account when thinking about how future politics and communications should look like.

Any form of direct democracy must think of who has the power to ask the questions that are voted on, who is included and excluded from the vote, what role the power of voice and visibility in the public sphere has, if and how minority interests are safeguarded, how to avoid manipulation by charismatic, authoritarian leaders, etc. Deliberative democracy faces comparable issues. Democracy not only needs procedures but also has a political economy. It requires individuals' time, space, resources for engaging in politics, which is why democratic reforms are not just about changing the political system in the narrow sense but should include political economic reforms that create more free time and spaces and opportunities for political engagement, political encounter, political debate, and controversies. For example, a reduction in working hours with full wage compensation and a basic income guarantee funded by capital taxation are not simply economic measures but are material foundations for democratic reforms as well.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I reflected on Elisabeth Korn and Jens Schröter's paper published in *tripleC*'s special issue on digital capitalism. I appreciate the thoughtfulness of their

reflections which have made me think anew about various aspects of the Internet, society, capitalism, and democracy.

I agree with the two authors on issues such as the criticism of Habermas' notion of technology, the importance of the question of how to advance post-capitalism, the entanglement of technology, politics, and political economy, the importance of improving democracy and digital democracy, etc.

I raised doubts about the direct comparability of the *Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto* and Habermas' theoretical works. I questioned the opposition of the Internet and broadcasting as two different and distinct models of communications. I pointed out the importance of reformed Public Service Media for the future of society and democracy. The Public Service Internet is one of the models we require together with societal transformations to make the world more fair, just, and free.

I argued that there is no strict restriction of deliberative democracy and the public sphere to liberalism. I raised questions about plebiscitary politics and their application to the Internet. I agree that we need to restructure democracy in relation to the Internet. But it remains an open question how that should best be done and how we can circumvent that the far-right and people such as Elon Musk capture the notions of the plebiscite and direct democracy for advancing the abolishment of democracy.

I stressed that the rise of new forms of fascism is a pressing political issue today. As fascism may wreck the world, there is the danger that soon we will no longer be able to debate what kind of democracy is best and what democracy we want to have.

I argued that today, we need a broad anti-fascist alliance that brings together socialists, progressive liberals, and others. Unfortunately, Adorno's (1973, 365) categorical imperative is highly topical and politically pressing today: How should society be organised so that "Auschwitz will not repeat itself, so that nothing similar will happen"?

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