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Paths Not Taken, Dreams Not Dreamt: A Rejoinder to Christian Fuchs on Democracy, the Internet, and Capitalism

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Abstract: This paper is a rejoinder to Christian Fuchs' "Democracy, the Internet, and Capitalism," published in *tripleC* as a reply to our essay "On a Potential Paradox of Public Service Media" (2024), which was part of *tripleC*'s special issue "Critical Perspectives on Digital Capitalism: Theories and Praxis". In this rejoinder, we will critically engage with open questions and unsolved contradictions of three points of discussion: the ideal of deliberative democracy in relation to the Internet, the broadcast model applied to ICTs, and the neutrality of (digital) technology.

Keywords: democracy, digital capitalism, Internet, *Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto*, technology

1. Introduction

Instead of trying to disprove or reject the thoughtful criticisms that Christian Fuchs has levelled in response to our paper, we propose to think *with* and *through* them. We would like to take seriously the introductory words of the *Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto* (2021, hereafter: *PSMIM*), where Fuchs and Unterberger stress the necessarily procedural nature of a manifesto: "The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto is an open-ended public debate process that wants to inspire envisioning democratic futures of society, the Internet, the public sphere and the media landscape" (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 6).

As already initiated by our original paper, we would like to further contribute to this debate in this rejoinder. It is by taking this impetus of collective imagination seriously that we criticise the terms and conditions used to buttress it. The open-endedness of a discussion does not preclude questions about the concrete material relations of Public Service Media and capital as well as the role of (media)technology played therein. Nor does it invalidate critical thought about the specific nature of democracy that keeps the latter from disintegrating into an undifferentiated formula. Such a formula may be useful as a unifying rampart against the exigent spread of (neo)fascism, but it also risks glossing over old yet pressing antagonisms unaffected by a manifesto's sheer will to sublation. For this purpose, we will focus on three points of Fuchs' critique: (1) democracy, (2) broadcasting and the Internet, and (3) the 'neutrality' of technology.

2. Democracy

Digital capitalism does not cause the decline of democracy. It certainly exacerbates and facilitates the bearing of private interests on the political sphere (Dahlgren 2005, 150), the circumvention of democratic due processes on the side of both corporations and nation-states (Zuboff 2019, 119), as well as the subsumption of experience,

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subjectivity, and communication under capital and thus the foreclosure of the very conditions of collective imagination previously negotiated within political and public institutions (Stiegler 2019, 42). Digital capitalism is not, however, the starting point of this degenerative appropriation of democratic principles. Our original paper sought to demonstrate that the dominant Internet's anti-democratic tendencies should instead be understood as the highly mediatised instrumentalisation of the neoliberal state's auto-cannibalistic willingness to sub-contract to private (media) companies its own public-service responsibilities. The insufficiently restricted economic and political power of digital platforms rightfully criticised by Habermas and the *PSMIM* is a symptom of the capitalist state's inherited inability to square democratic legitimation with the private accumulation of profits. Digital capitalism should thus be regarded as born from and constitutive of the contradiction (or rather: contradictory compatibility) between democracy and capital that is older than (but now heavily intertwined with) its media technology.

We will start our rejoinder with the notion whose terminology features 126 times on the 135 pages of the *Manifesto*, its adjunct survey, and its commentary: democracy. As showcased by our short introduction to this section, the project of imagining an alternative Internet, one that strengthens rather than weakens democracy, must also be a project of imagining an alternative political economy. Fuchs is keenly aware of this correlation. In his reply, he writes: "Political and economic questions are deeply entangled. Political economy matters." We couldn't agree more. In what follows, we will engage with his criticisms of our approach to democracy that allow us to concretise and deepen our attempt to think collectively about what a synchronous transformation of the Internet and political economy may entail.

2.1. Liberal and Deliberative Democracy

Fuchs rightly points out that, in some passages of our paper, we have mixed the concepts of liberal and deliberative democracy. He points to David Held, Frank Cunningham, and of course, Jürgen Habermas to demonstrate that the concepts of the public sphere and deliberative democracy in particular are not restricted to liberalism. We concur with this point, which is why it deserves more attention. When Fuchs substantiates his claim by pointing to Habermas, he uses the latter's *Between Facts and Norms* (1992) and the essay "Three Normative Models of Democracy" (1994). In these texts, the deliberative model of democracy is indeed distinguished sharply from both the liberal and the republican paradigm upon which it builds as a third normative model. However, this distinction is not so easily made when looking at Habermas' earlier work. Especially in *The Structural Transformation of the Public* Sphere (1962), which largely informed our discussion, the contiguity of liberalism and deliberative democracy is much more pronounced. In his introduction to this book, Thomas McCarthy writes: "As a sphere between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed, the liberal public sphere took shape" (McCarthy 1991, xi). This identification of a public sphere built around rational-critical debate with the liberal paradigm becomes all the more prominent as soon as it is threatened by the encroachment of the modern industrial state and its blending of private and public spheres. To quote Habermas at length:

> According to the liberal model of the public sphere, the 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. To the extent that they were commercialized and underwent economic, technological, and

> organizational concentration, however, they have turned during the last hundred years into complexes of societal power, so that precisely their remaining in private hands in many ways threatened the critical function of publicist institutions. (Habermas 1991/1962, 188)

The liberal public sphere is made out as a privileged arena of deliberation independent of both commercial and state influence. This independence was gradually undermined by the emergence of oligopolistic structures, which necessitated the intervention of the state to safeguard the public sphere. Habermas applies this logic to modern mass media whose concentration in private hands required their transformation into public corporations (Habermas 1991/1962, 187). It is from within this logic that we formulated a paradox of Public Service Media: The state tries to mitigate the susceptibility of mass media to private commercial interests by turning them into Public Service Media, but by intervening, it administers the by definition unadministered public sphere. Paradoxically, the attempt to democratise is itself deemed undemocratic.

We gleaned this paradox from Habermas' early thought on the liberal public sphere which he closely correlates with deliberative democratic processes. In light of the *PSMIM*'s strong inclination towards deliberative democracy and its vision of Public Service Media as "independent from governmental and business interests" (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 11), this leads us to postulate a similarity between Habermas' early theory and the *Manifesto's* vision of democracy, media, and the public sphere, and to subsequently criticise this similarity for its apparent atavism and its precipitate reproduction of an older paradox. Despite this similarity, Fuchs is nevertheless correct: The *Manifesto* itself is not wholly associated with the liberal paradigm. In fact, given its many contributors, it does not prefer any one model of democracy – a point we will return to later. Fuchs uses the Habermas of the 1990s to detangle deliberation from its liberal connotation ascribed to it by the Habermas of the 1960s. Not only is this approach valid – after all, we used many different Habermasian texts to advance our original argument –, but it speaks for Habermas as a thinker who develops his ideas over time and whose work evinces a great theoretical breadth. But a decisive question still stands: *Does this detangling of concepts absolve the paradox* that we see applicable to the *PSMIM* based on its similarity to Habermas' early identification of deliberation with liberal democracy?

Let us take a closer look at the two Habermasian texts used by Fuchs to repudiate our mix of liberal and deliberative democracy. In "Three Normative Models of Democracy" (1996/1994), Habermas positions deliberative democracy, or discourse theory, as a third model that builds upon its liberal and republican predecessors: "Both the liberal and the republican model presuppose a view of society as centred in the state – be it the state as guardian of a market-society or the state as the self-conscious institutionalization of an ideal procedure of an ethical community" (Habermas 1996/1994, 26). Deliberative democracy takes elements from both sides while grounding its form of legitimation not in the state but in the institutionalisation of communicative power: "Strictly speaking, this communicative power springs from the interactions between legally institutionalized will-formation and culturally mobilized publics. The latter, for their part, find a basis in the associations of a civil society quite distinct from both state and economy alike" (Habermas 1996/1994, 29). Civil society is hereby understood as continually engaged in deliberative processes, in the discursive negotiation of ideas on how to achieve a free and just society. These intersubjective processes function as a normative ideal, a liminal case – an important fact reiterated by Habermas (2023) in his latest book on digital media's degeneration of deliberative politics.

Habermas is of course the first to acknowledge that this normative ideal leaves room for the possibility of pathology, i.e. the aberration of public communication and the colonisation of its constitutionally regulated circulation of power that, in his earlier work, seemed inevitable with the rise of the modern industrial state. This leads us to the second text referenced by Fuchs: *Between Facts and Norms* (1992). Contrasting the democratic models of Habermas' pessimistic early and more optimistic later writings, Joseph L. Staats expounds:

> *Between Facts and Norms* is built upon a foundation that presupposes the viability of a normatively autonomous lifeworld where discursive engagement gives legitimacy to validity claims. Without a normatively autonomous life world, with a corrupted lifeworld in other words, the democratic edifice constructed by Habermas is a mere house of cards that comes crashing down. (Staats 2004, 588)

Where the system colonises lifeworld, where civil society is interpolated by state or commercial interests (whose differentiation becomes increasingly hard in neoliberal terms), the symmetry that ideally characterises the institutionalised discursive processes of deliberative democracy dissolves. In this vein, Habermas notes that the circulation of communicative power within deliberative democracy "is nullified if the administrative system becomes independent of communicatively generated power, if the social power of functional systems and large organizations (including the mass media) is converted into illegitimate power" (Habermas 1996/1992 in Staats 2004, 589). The correlation of liberalism and deliberation need not even apply for us to nonetheless find ourselves in the same situation: the oligopolistic concentration of economic and ideological power allows media to pummel the discursive processes of the public sphere. What exactly keeps this situation from sliding right back into the same paradox of Public Service Media that we formulated for the early Habermas?

While the aberration of communicative power within the liberal public sphere seemed inescapable to Habermas in the 1960s, its pathology is reduced to a mere *possibility* that may threaten deliberative democracy for Habermas in the 1990s. Staats points to two explanations for this mitigation. First, the later Habermas distanced himself from the Frankfurt School model of passive spectatorship, arguing: "For our purposes, it suffices to make it plausible that in a perceived crisis situation, the *actors in civil society* thus far neglected in our scenario *can* assume a surprisingly active and momentous role" (Habermas 1996/1992 in Staats 2004, 590). Second, Habermas comes to ascribe a similarly active potential to media themselves, claiming that "under conditions of crisis or public mobilization the mass media will apply normative professional journalistic standards to actually work on behalf of civil society in the political process rather than in opposition to it" (Staats 2004, 590). Why was this not an option before? Why were mass media generally harbingers of the colonisation of civil society in *The Public Transformation of the Public Sphere* instead of barriers against it?

It seems to us that the notion of deliberative democracy and "quality press" (Habermas 2008, 137) fighting side-by-side to safeguard the public sphere is a stance always already born out of the experience of successful Public Service Media, i.e. out of the existence of a funding structure independent of state and commercial interests. It is not, therefore, a stance that in any way absolves the paradox of Public Service Media. On the contrary, it forces us deeper into the paradox by presupposing the very media structure whose conditions of possibility arise from the administration of its *un*administered public sphere. The (state-ensured) administration of deliberation is used to guarantee the ideally unadministered circulation of communicative power within a

deliberative democracy. Alarmingly, this pledge of allegiance hinges on "conditions of crisis or public mobilization," on a state of exception, to compel the same functional system that illegitimately undermines this circulation to adopt legitimate journalistic standards that enable rather than disfigure deliberation. The digitally expedited spread of fascism may give rise to such conditions of crisis. It certainly makes collective imaginations of alternative democratic media critically necessary. It should not, however, deter us from asking the questions: What form of democracy got us here and what form of democracy may get us out?

To detangle deliberative and liberal democracy is both merited and important, but it changes little concerning our broader concern with the fixation on deliberation and the uncolonised public spheres as ideals of a democratic media landscape. This applies not only to Habermas' political theories of the 1990s but also, more importantly, to his 2023 reworking of his theory as well as the *PSMIM*. In our view, both these texts – irrespective of their formal differences as a theoretical text on the one hand and a manifesto on the other – follow the assumption that the safeguarding of (all) democracy is primarily a matter of facilitating collective deliberation in a free, uncolonised public sphere. The circulation of communicative power within deliberative democracy is assured only if it is coupled with a legitimate (i.e. adhering to professional journalistic standards) use of media's social power. Oligopolistic organisations like digital platforms jeopardise this coupling. They must, therefore, be recoupled to the institutionalisation of communicative power by turning them into Public Service Media.

Yet if we understand digital capitalism not as the cause of a decline of democracy but as an instrumentalisation of the neoliberal state's outsourcing of its own public-service responsibilities to private media companies, then this recoupling faces serious structural problems. It would mean that digital platforms are themselves a symptom of an administrative system that has surrendered its claim on democratic legitimation, submitting itself to a universalised market logic that is incommensurable with the structure of democracy (Streeck 2012, 42). Habermas notes that the circulation of communicative power within deliberative democracy "is nullified if the administrative system becomes independent of communicatively generated power" (1996/1992, 386). It can be argued that a neoliberal political economy has achieved exactly that. In fact, it has already been argued that digital capitalism has provided an improved medial infrastructure for this split between the administrative and legitimising systems (Dean 2005, 53). How, then, can more deliberation, more institutionalised communication – even in its freest form – be the answer, while pointing to Public Service Media without addressing their fundamental paradox?

2.2. The Ideal of Deliberation and Its Plebiscitary Critique

A simple reiteration of deliberation and communication as ideals of democracy is not enough when imagining alternative media. We agree with Fuchs: Political economy *matters* and a funding structure independent of state and commercial interests that includes the reorganisation of wage labour and free time is without doubt a necessary starting point. Nevertheless, we are still sceptical about the reasoning used by the *PSMIM* to get to this point. Not only is the paradox of Public Service Media left unaccounted for but so is the historical development from monopoly capitalism to late capitalism, from late capitalism to neoliberalism, and from neoliberalism to digital capitalism, which we traced in our paper.

At first glance, and especially in the face of the immanent crisis posed by fascism, this may seem like a hair-splitting argument. What this development has made increasingly visible, however, is a *split* between the administrative system (fiscal planning

around private accumulation) and the legitimising system (voting, public discourse etc.). In their currently dominant form, digital media have nested in and widened this split through their insidious redoubling of what may look and feel like a deliberative public sphere that is ultimately situated on privately owned platforms, where algorithmically organised communication is turned into a mode of accumulation. Jodi Dean's concept of *communicative capitalism* addresses this split: "We might express this disconnect between engaged criticism and national strategy in terms of a distinction between politics as the circulation of content and politics as official policy" (Dean 2005, 52-53). The administrative system in the form of official policy unties its legitimation from deliberative processes; it can do so when communication begins to spin around itself, when it becomes not the means but the goal of political participation within digital platforms. "Today, the circulation of content in the dense, intensive networks of global communications relieves top-level actors (corporate, institutional and governmental) from the obligation to respond" (Dean 2005, 53). This split nullifies the institutionalisation of communicative power as an ideal for change and, most importantly, it cannot be solved through more communication as long as this split remains wide open, and democracy is used synonymously with deliberation.

The suture of the split between the administrative and the legitimising system requires a different political economy. It also requires a different democracy. We follow Nathan Gardels and Nicolaus Berggruen when they write in *Renovating Democracy* (2019):

> In short, the structural response to the anger, alienation, and cynicism leading to the suicide of democracies is not more democracy of the same kind with only a change of partisan players. The response must involve going back to the drawing board of democratic design to update how it all works in a world far removed from its origins. (Gardels and Berggruen 2019, 41)

There is no going back to a form of democracy whose gap between ideal and reality has outgrown our lived experience of democratic politics under digital capitalism. It is for this reason that, in the concluding sentence of our original paper, we asked the question: "Could the toxicity of current Internet communication be defused by abstracting from its commodification of individuality a new invigoration of direct or plebiscitary democracy?" Fuchs criticises that we "only speak of 'direct or plebiscitary' as the model for democracy [we] want to use for restructuring democracy after the Internet" without, for instance, touching upon participatory democracy. Our only mention of both forms of democracy is situated within the final question. We absolutely agree with Fuchs that participatory democracy understood as a political system structured around cooperative initiative, self-management, and citizen's groups is an equally suitable point of departure, especially when thinking about digital media. For this rejoinder, however, we would like to focus on what we had in mind regarding the usefulness of a plebiscitary model of democracy.

Naturally, we are not voicing support for the kinds of plebiscitary politics that Fuchs identifies with Nazi plebiscites, Brexit, or Elon Musk's digital megalomania. These are, and should be, cases in which the term plebiscitary democracy is used to denote the *perversion* of democracy at the hands of a political elite interested in the strategic suppression, derailment, and corruption of popular participation and legitimation, often via media. Jürgen Habermas (1996/1992, 184) is a strong proponent of this dominant use of the term. But there exist other ways of conceptualising the plebiscitary democracy, historically prominent, for example, in Max Weber's notion of *charisma* and reworked

in a very interesting way by Jeffrey Edward Green's more recent *The Eyes of the People* (2010). It is the latter that informed our concluding question and that we shall examine here.

According to Green, the same quality of plebiscitary democracy that makes it a derogatory term in Habermas' vocabulary may also act as the impetus for an alternative vision of democracy: the interpellation of the civil actor as a spectator of politics. He clarifies that "a theory of plebiscitary democracy does not affirm that it is better to be a spectator than a political actor, but only that it is possible to do democratic theory from the spectator's perspective" (Green 2010, 5). What are the benefits of viewing democracy and its processes of decision-making and citizenship from the spectator's perspective? From within the dominant normative paradigm of deliberative democracy, such a question may seem heretical. After all, it ostensibly abandons the heavily fought-for principles of sovereign self-rule and legitimation understood as a set of communicative processes, an ideal subscribed to by deliberative and participatory democracy alike, which "uphold the promise of a polity in which the addressees of the law might also understand themselves as the law's authors" (Green 2010, 41). Although the citizen qua discursive co-legislator may be the ideal protagonist of a healthy democracy, Habermas himself (in the text referenced by Fuchs) amends this ideal, writing that "only the administrative system itself can 'act'" (Habermas 1996/1994, 29). He differentiates between the discursive practices of the public sphere and the realm of actual decision-making made possible by parliamentary representation: "The public opinion that is worked up via democratic procedures into communicative power cannot 'rule' of itself, but can only point the use of administrative power in specific directions" (Habermas 1996/1994, 29). The deliberative processes of the public sphere function as an early warning system, but they do not themselves elicit binding decisions. This is why a spit between the administrative and legitimising systems is so fatal. It forces communication into a maelstrom of itself, unbound from sovereign decision-making, tied to the benevolence of the quality press acting in the interest of the public good in times of crisis, but nevertheless productive of a semi-authentic feeling of participation and collective power.

Green's theory of plebiscitary democracy aims to think beyond the communicative maelstrom of deliberation/participation-based models of democracy without, however, disavowing their legitimacy. For this purpose, he emphasises the everyday experience of politics, largely devoid of influence, knowledge, the feeling of collective force, and discursive participation. "While deliberative ethics have undeniable relevance to those who do in fact engage in processes of collective decision making, they are much less germane to the great majority for whom political life involves no decision but the occasional vote" (Green 2010, 59). As we saw in Habermas, this assessment does not necessarily break with the deliberative model which is aware of its privileged applicability to the administrative system. Instead, the problem Green identifies lies in the universalisation of the deliberative ideal beyond this administrative system, i.e. the argument "that deliberative ethics are universally applicable to *all* citizens within a well-functioning democratic polity. Even though deliberation is necessarily an activity for those in power […] it is nonetheless conceived as a model for all citizenship" (Green 2010, 59). It is not problematic to view deliberation as a privileged form of political decision-making, but it is problematic to stress deliberation as an ideal for *all* citizens when this neither reflects nor can reflect the everyday life in current mass democracies dominated by the position of the political spectator.

The perpetual emphasis on unhindered public communication is good and valuable, but when confronted with the everyday feelings of powerlessness or futility that the

majority of an electorate may attach to political activism or even just participation it leads to disappointment and a loss of trust in political institutions. The deliberative ideal may, in this case, lead to its opposite – the unwillingness to communicate at all and the withdrawal of civil actors to the role of the spectator. A deliberative model will inevitably see this as a pathogenic deviation from an ideal. A plebiscitary model may allow us to reevaluate this deviation as a possible point of departure. This leads Green to ask: "Might there not be a different set of ethics for citizens in their everyday function as spectators?" (Green 2010, 59).

Plebiscitary democracy, with its interpellation of the civil actor as a spectator of politics, may offer exactly that: a model of democracy that does not risk losing itself in the communicative maelstrom of the deliberative ideal, and that takes the split between the administrative and legislative systems into account with the goal of suturing it. Green terms this the *ocular model* of democracy that situates the democratic power of the civil actor not in his/her voice but in his/her eyes: "It is the gaze – that hierarchical form of visualization that inspects, observes, and achieves surveillance – that functions as the chief organ of popular empowerment" (Green 2010, 9). Green calls for the establishment of a form of power that does not relieve politics qua official policy "from the obligation to respond" (Dean 2005, 53) – a form of power in which the electorate's gaze exerts pressure on those tasked with its representation via *sousveillance* (Mann et al. 2003). This does not mean that it envisions vision as a passive entity. On the contrary, Habermas' own scholastic journey from Frankfurt to Birmingham, which underpins the transformation of his political theory of the mass media spectator from 1962 to 1994, already gave us a glimpse of what an active spectator may look like. Viewed from a level of affect, this plebiscitary form of power, "by redefining the People as an ocular rather than a vocal being, rescues the very notion of the People from its recent demise, revitalizes it, and thus makes it possible for everyday citizens to understand themselves as members of a meaningful and effective collective" (Green 2010, 17).

Green's (re)vision of plebiscitary democracy does not abandon principles of sovereign self-rule and legitimation. It merely situates them differently and disentangles them from their dominant and precarious identification with communicative and deliberative processes. It is this conceptualisation of the plebiscitary model that we had in mind when asking whether it could help us *envision* an alternative structure of the Internet. Despite publishing his book in 2010, Green does not engage explicitly with digital media. His understanding of the *gaze* (linked to Guy Debord and Laura Mulvey) is only applied to mass media's broadcast model. It is nonetheless capable of contributing to a discussion on the Public Service Internet. It could provide us with a valuable way of avoiding the untimely idealisation of symmetrical communication without, at the same time, downplaying the decisive role of individual and collective participation. It may also spawn concrete ideas of how to use the Internet (e.g. its modes of live streaming) as a method of *sousveillance* against its current application as an apparatus of *surveillance*. It can help us ask questions about the necessary alternatives to the current Internet and the current political economy while putting its finger right on the administrative/legitimating split at the heart of the neoliberal state and at the base of digital capitalism.

2.3. The *Manifesto* Has No Particular Vision of Democracy

By virtue of being an open-ended and procedural form of text, co-authored and signed by many different people with as many different backgrounds, it is not conducive to ascribe to a manifesto a single vision of democracy. What we sought to do in our original paper and this rejoinder is to summarise the *PSMIM*'s general tendencies which

point to a deliberative model. What is deemed anti-democratic about current digital media is primarily their disfiguration of discourse through corporate drives for profit and consumption, their colonisation of the public sphere understood as a shared space of reflection, and their kindling of individualism and one-sided world views. Statements such as “As currently organised, the Internet separates and divides instead of creating common spaces for negotiating differences and disagreement” (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 10), survey answers like “the Internet and face-to-face encounters support democratic debate and decision-making in the public sphere” (30), and commentary reading “Democratic politics depends on two fundamental rights: to a vote and to a voice” (85) point to a voice-based vision of democracy, ideally realised in Public Service Media. Nonetheless, we find valid Fuchs’ pointer that the *Manifesto* itself “does not specify a particular version of democracy it prefers.” But this defence is not immune to criticism. If we want to answer the question “What form of democracy got us here and what form of democracy may get us out?” a preferred vision of democracy is necessary. The absence of such a vision, even if due to the specific genre of a text, defers a genuine problem that has serious effects on even the most open-ended discussion about alternative media.

Democracy thrives on the negotiation of disparate opinions. It may be directed towards consensus, but it is dissensus that constitutes its driving force. “Prior to being a platform for rational debate,” writes Jacques Rancière, “consensus is a specific regime of the sensible, a particular way of positing rights as a community’s *archē*” (Rancière 2011, 83). For him, a pathology of democracy is not derived from dissenting opinions but instead from the enforcement of homogenising unanimity: “By abolishing dissensus and placing a ban on political subjectivization, consensus reduces politics to the police” (Rancière 2011, 83). On the surface, the currently dominant Internet is fraught with disparate opinions. Below the surface, however, in the lower strata of the stack, it adheres to an unprecedented logic of homogenisation. As noted by Jodi Dean: “Real antagonism or dissent is foreclosed. Matters previously thought to require debate and struggle are now addressed as personal issues or technical concerns” (Dean 2005, 56). The widespread use of algorithms that postdates Dean’s article, aggravates this foreclosure of politics through the elimination of contingency via the computation of relational probabilities (Rouvroy and Berns 2013; Tufekci 2014). An aesthetic of difference overlays a reality of homogenisation.

With its foray through Habermas’ work on late capitalism (1992/1973), our original paper sought to demonstrate that the homogenising logic of the foreclosure of dissensus has been conducive to a certain stage of post-war capitalism. Faced with an acute crisis of legitimation, the capitalist state turns to the *formalisation* of democracy, trying to make compatible democracy and private accumulation. For this to happen, “the administrative system must be sufficiently independent of legitimating will-formation” (Habermas 1992/1973, 36). Again, we are faced with a split. In 1973, Habermas pointed to the broadcast model of mass media as the ideal media infrastructure for this split. Its structure mirrors the binary differentiation between those who decide and those whose watch that is already active within a representative democracy that has successfully nullified the circulation of communicative power. Mass democracy, when made the political framework of a capitalist political economy, strives for legitimising consensus at the cost of its political power. What George Grant would call the homogenising movement of computer technology (Grant 1976) and what Dean would call the post-politics of the Internet have aided and expedited this formalisation of democracy. Real-existing democracy and the real-existing Internet have both subscribed to a broader tendency of homogenisation of which capitalism is both a moulding force as

well as the material result. *The problem is not that democracy and the Internet are incompatible; the problem is that, historically, they are*.

To speak of an incompatibility of democracy and digital capitalism only works when divorcing democracy from any one kind of democracy that has historically existed. A certain kind of democracy, namely a representative democracy that coats its internal split via the idealised maelstrom of self-contained communication, evinces a great deal of compatibility with a certain kind of capitalism eager (and forced) to legitimate itself democratically. To ask, "What kind of democracy" is not, therefore, a hair-splitting question. We cannot afford not to ask it. If we do not ask it, be it because of the heterogeneity of a manifesto as a genre of text or to strengthen our broader allegiance against (new) fascism, we risk petrifying democracy as an empty formula – a hollow ideal whose evocation spans indiscriminately from left to right. One cannot criticise the dominant Internet for its anti-democratic character if one is not willing, at the same time, to criticise the real-existing democracy that has historically not only accompanied but actively bread and supported this dominant Internet to complement its own auto-cannibalistic drive for self-formalisation and homogenisation. A radical vision of new Public Service Media as proposed by the *PSMIM* must avoid shifting a formalised democracy elsewhere, in this case into a medialised sphere. It must aim to restructure democracy itself, asking: What form of democracy got us here and what form of democracy may get us out?

3. Criticising Utopias: The Broadcast Model and the Internet

In this section, we would like to respond to Fuchs' criticism of our original paper's understanding of the broadcast model of Public Service Media. His criticism is threefold. "*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. […] *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." Before we turn to these criticisms directly, it is important to stake the parameters of this discussion.

On the very first page of his reply, Fuchs points out that the uncolonised public sphere envisioned by the *PSMIM* 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 beside the point that our localisation of the digital public sphere in this intermediary position was inferred from recurring phrases in the manifesto that point to Public Service Media as "independent from governmental and business interests" (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 11), "independent from corporate and political power" (14), "independent from the state and private corporations" (19). It is also beside the point that we wrote that the digital public sphere *occupies* this intermediary position rather than being identical to it. What matters is that we ascribed a localised position to a "vision and struggle," i.e. to an antagonistic potential that draws its transformative power from its unboundedness from the current organisation of the dominant Internet. The reorganisation of the Internet as a Public Service Medium is first and foremost a demand for radical change and not a search for a compromise that would be compatible with the current material structure of the Internet. We agree with this *utopian* sentiment, understood in the sense ascribed to it by Leszek Kołakowski:

> By utopia, I mean that state of social consciousness which corresponds to a social movement aiming at radical change in human society, but which does not correspond exactly to these changes, but symbolises them in an idealised and

> mystified way. […] Utopia is thus the mystified consciousness of the actual historical tendency. (Kołakowski 1964, 145, our translation)

Kołakowski emphasises that utopian thought must emanate from the negation of perceived reality. Importantly, negation does not stand in opposition to construction (Kołakowski 1964, 143). Fuchs argues in a similar vein, pointing to the Hegelian notion of sublation (*Aufhebung*) as a guiding principle that keeps the transformation of the Internet from falling onto the problems of older Public Service Media. "We need utopias as alternatives," it says in the *Manifesto*, "We need to *renew* Public Service Media and realise the utopia of creating a Public Service Internet" (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 14).

How, then, does one even criticise a utopian "vision and struggle"? To ascribe to it a position within the dominant material structure by which to measure its efficacy is already to demystify it and to rob it of its negative potential. What we set out to do in our original paper was, therefore, to criticise the *Manifesto's* vision of a Public Service Internet by highlighting the similarities between its underlying notion of an uncolonised public sphere and the vision of the liberal public sphere in Habermas' early work. We did this by demonstrating the *Manifesto's* parallels to Habermas' (2023) recent book in which he both reiterates and contradicts (sometimes at the same time) his earlier theory by imposing a mass media paradigm onto digital media. This allowed us to criticise the *Manifesto's* utopian vision not for its lack of materiality, i.e. what makes it utopian in the first place, but for its failure to rid itself of the inherited liabilities of the ideal of communicative power and uncolonised independence, rendered paradoxical by the development of both politics and capitalism – the two colonising forces it claims independence from. This would make the *Manifesto's* vision and struggle atavistic. In other words, it dreams of a structure that has been dreamt before from within an irretrievable past material reality.

We do not seek to cuff the necessary utopia of a Public Service Internet to the top-down structure of broadcasting media. After all, that is exactly what we criticise Habermas for. Instead, we seek to show that the *Manifesto* indirectly imposes these cuffs upon itself by binding its utopian vision to normative ideals (among them most prominently deliberative democracy) which have, in their successful historical perversion, buttressed a certain kind of capitalism. It is this capitalism, namely late capitalism and its immanent crisis of legitimation, which in turn lay the foundations for the same digital oligopolies that made necessary the *Manifesto's* utopian vision in the first place. In short: the *PSMIM* risks running in circles.

Let's come back to Fuchs' criticisms. It is unproductive to search in a manifesto described as a "vision and struggle" for hints of a material structure (both in the sense of a broadcasting model and filters). This is not the conversation we aim to have. Rather, we aim to take seriously the *PSMIM*'s impetus of collective imagination and work towards a stronger utopia, one whose ideals and directions surpass the level of moral protest and rise instead to the level of practical thinking (Kołakowski 1964, 158-159). As already concretised in our discussion of democracy, what made us correlate the *Manifesto* to the broadcast model was the values it attaches to a certain communicative situation and the democratic ideals derived from this situation. Take, for example, this statement: "Safeguarding Public Service Media's role as a trusted and independent source of information and analysis and as a responsible mediator and moderator of user-generated comment and content requires transparent procedures of accountability" (Unterberger and Fuchs, 11). Or: "It supports active citizenship by providing comprehensive information and analysis, diversity of social representation and creative

expression and extended opportunities for participation" (10). Or: "They are spaces where critical, independent journalists make high-quality news and where creative professionals make high-quality programmes that educate, inform and entertain in ways that reflect the affordances of the digital age. They engage citizens in new forms that build on the experiences, structures and content of the public service broadcast model" (14).

Taken together, what image emerges from this understanding of the role of Public Service Media? They help engaged subjects to stay informed independently of the state, corporations and even, as Fuchs claims, ideology in general. They facilitate a multifaceted view of the world that allows informed subjects to participate meaningfully in the institutionalised circulation of communicative power that constitutes an uncolonised public sphere. These are extremely valuable goals. They build on the infrastructure of previous broadcasting Public Service Media, while also going beyond it. Fuchs is right: The broadcast model of media should not determine the limits of our alternative vision of Public Service Media. We can imagine different, more participatory forms that go against the currently dominant use of the Internet as a broadcast medium. But even in the face of such Hegelian *Aufhebung*, we are still moving within the ideals and goals set by broadcasting media and their notion of a free yet moderated, engaging yet mediated discourse. We are still tying the democratic and liberating potential of media to the administration (and sometimes even centralisation) of the per definition unadministered public sphere. We are still calling for more communication, when it was this call for communication that was appropriated and perverted by a capitalist state that, under the pressure of squaring accumulation and legitimation, split itself to outsource its public service responsibilities first to the more or less independent funding structure of Public Service Media and then, as the Fordist mode of production neared its post-Fordist supersession, to more individualised and privately owned conglomerates and platforms.

To us, the broadcast model of media is not just one form among many that Public Service Media could have taken. It is deeply intertwined with a set of ideals that we have identified as congruent with those of the (liberal) public sphere and the normative model of deliberative democracy. When faced with the reality of a mass democracy and a capitalist state, these ideals are first administered and then turned against themselves. In our original paper, we pointed to Habermas 1962, 1973, and 1981 to demonstrate that Public Service Media have, from this perspective, been construed as an attempt of democratising capital whose success nonetheless depended on a certain subject position, namely one in which communication is organised in a top-down structure of mass media. This subject position – mirroring that of representative democracy – held enormous potential for a capitalist state unable to square its democratic legitimation with private accumulation. It is this same subject position that, in the case of digital capitalism, was strategically left to spin around itself in a maelstrom of communication disconnected from administrative decision-making. It is also this subject position (both Habermas and Streeck would call it the subject position of the consumer) that the *PSMIM* tries to fight through the renewal and reorganisation of Public Service Media. But the reasons behind this reinvigoration remain the same ideals that brought about Public Service Media and their previous broadcast structure in the first place.

To truly think beyond this structure – without maintaining that a new structure will simply evolve as a by-product of the broader democratic-socialist restructuring of political economy – entails the obligation to redefine, on the one hand, what form of democracy and participation it is that we want to safeguard and, on the other hand, how we can avoid the same traps into which Public Service Media and their administration

of the public sphere fell when previously confronted when by the capitalist state. The paradox of Public Service Media should be part of this theoretical and practical discussion. It cannot be subsumed under a sheer will to sublation. A utopia of alternative media must choose wisely the ideals it seeks to dream of and the historical contexts of their emergence.

4. The Neutrality of Technology

Our discussions of democracy and the broadcasting model point to a more fundamental question: that of technology within a social framework. In the last section of this rejoinder, we would like to briefly engage with this question, responding to some of the criticisms that Fuchs has launched against our previous reflections on the 'neutrality' of technology. First of all, we agree with Fuchs' conclusion: "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." Though we are quite close to Fuchs' arguments, we nevertheless want to point to some problems in the theoretical discussion of what Fuchs calls the "dialectic of society and technology."

The so-called neutrality of technology is a complicated phenomenon. Suppose we say a "democratic Internet requires a democratic socialist society as its foundation" as Fuchs does. On the one hand, this does not sound like assuming technology is neutral since a 'democratic' Internet is obviously pre-structured in a different way than, let's say, a non-democratic Internet. In that sense it is not neutral, it has a certain – hopefully positive – democratic structure. On the other hand, saying that such a democratic Internet "requires a democratic socialist society as its foundation" points to a certain neutrality of technology, since otherwise the "democratic socialist society" could not form the Internet in a democratic way. Society is seen as the 'foundation' which then structures a technology. But if a given technology does not resist the social forming, it is not only neutral but moreover: Why should we discuss technology at all if it's just a compliant mould in which society, so to speak, can impress itself? "Indeed, it is worth asking, as Leo Marx has, whether there is any justification for the separate study of the history of technology if technology does not to some extent determine history" (Edgerton 1999, 122). A thesis like Fuchs', i.e. "Rather, technologies in class societies emerge in antagonistic contexts and reflect antagonisms in complex and transfigured manners," is not only vague but exhibits the same problem: If technology does indeed "reflect" – like a mirror – societal imperatives (be it in antagonistic form) it is neutral, although after it is formed, it exhibits certain characteristics that pre-determine (or at least influence) later practices and is therefore not neutral, otherwise the whole discussion if we need a more democratic internet would be superfluous. We can, of course, call this the "dialectic of society and technology" – but in a way "dialectic" is a magic word that covers up the interesting theoretical problems.

Wouldn't it be a solution to argue that a technology is at the beginning of its history somewhat less socially formed and then, in the course of its further development, becomes more and more structured socially? This would also include that certain developmental paths are not taken, while other paths or perhaps only one path remains. There is a concept corresponding to this notion: *path dependency*. Fuchs rejects this solution: "There is not a pure, neutral technology that is first born innocently and then becomes subsumed." This implies that a given technology is fully formed already from the start. But that does not conform to the results of historical research – often new

technologies undergo processes of regulation and get involved in heterogeneous practices. Brian Winston (1998, 11-13) has argued that in the development of new technologies a "law of the suppression of radical potential" can be observed. This means: all potentials of the technology to produce effects that might be disruptive to the dominant social order are repressed. On the one hand, this is done via laws, via regulations through the state (sometimes on an international level, see e. g. the recent "EU AI Act," which strives to regulate so-called artificial intelligence). On the other hand, such prescriptions can form the technological structure (so that certain problematic possibilities are excluded), one example might be that copy protection mechanisms or watermarks etc. are developed to technically prevent illegally copying data (like music, films, games etc.). But this example also shows: new technologies set up pressure to discuss new laws. Especially the continuously accelerating evolution of digital technologies exerts pressure to react on the law and the state apparatus. In that sense, technologies do not only reflect but *change* social structures, because they introduce possibilities that were not thought of before. Moreover, this demonstrates that technologies cannot be fully formed right from the start – if so, how can unexpected and problematic possibilities arise afterwards that call for new laws?

It is often the case that new technologies are accompanied by extensive "sociotechnical imaginaries" (Jasanoff/Kim 2015). The Internet is an especially apt example. The 1990s were inundated with utopian ideas of what wonderful – amongst others: post-capitalist – effects this new technology might have (Schröter 2004, 20-148). But most of these ideas vanished or were severely reformulated and the Internet was step by step re-formed, the radical potential was suppressed and now is the Internet mainly a big machine for coordinating markets and companies and for analysing and surveilling customers. Many additional technologies (mainly software) have been developed to serve these capitalist purposes. After a while, several formations of the "Internet" – or to be more precise: the several forms of hard- and software, of institutional arrangements, of imaginaries, paratexts and normalised practices that comprise this heterogeneous assemblage – became sedimented and stabilised in certain ways. The Internet could not be formed in a democratic or even post-capitalist way when it was still in its infancy and therefore comparatively open and fluid – so why should this be possible today? To say in 2024, that the "Internet has both and at the same time potentials for mediating exploitation and domination and advancing the logic of the commons," as does Fuchs, may be correct in an abstract sense, but is it still historically true?

This problem of *path dependency* is especially relevant for programmable technologies (like digital ones) since they have to be programmed to be anything in particular (Schröter 2004). They are in a special way objects of social forming (see e. g. the discussion on "bias" in datasets for artificial intelligence). Seen in this way they are indeed less neutral than, let's say, a hammer. Computers, that is digital technologies, can be differently programmed – but what is a socialist hammer as compared to a capitalist one? This is where our seeming self-contradiction criticised by Fuchs comes from. He compares two statements from us: First we asked: "But what if the media structure of digital communication, irrespective of who owns or controls it, denies its democratic instrumentalisation." Later we wrote: "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." Fuchs comments: "On the one hand, they here agree that an alternative, democratic Internet is possible. On the other hand, they present technology as neutral." This comment is not quite correct, since we do

not present – with the first statement – technology as neutral. On the contrary, we ask a question: What if the technology was not neutral, what if its historical sedimentation was not compatible with democratic ideals and even materially resisting any attempt to re-form it? What if the path dependency renders all trials to build a democratic Internet obsolete? It is important to emphasise the thoroughly inquisitive nature of these reflections. Yes, we think: "It has yet to be shown what its [the Internet's] potentialities are for democratic politics" – but we are not very optimistic. There is no self-contradiction in our argument, but a certain call for realism.

5. Conclusion

Our rejoinder to Christian Fuchs' reply to our original paper "On a Potential Paradox of Public Service Media," published in *tripleC*, has sought to contribute to the urgent discussion on the foundations and implications of a restructuring of the currently dominant Internet. We agree with Fuchs that this discussion is absolutely decisive in striving towards a future in which information and communication technologies consolidate democracy rather than undermining its principles for the shameful benefit of a few capitalist proprietors. Due to the significance of this discussion, we regard it as vital to persistently question the terms used to buttress it.

For our rejoinder, we focused on three points of Fuchs' critique: (1) democracy, (2) broadcasting and the Internet, and (3) the 'neutrality' of technology. First, we argued that Fuchs' criticism of the correlation between liberal and deliberative democracy implied by our original paper can indeed be sustained when looking at Habermas' later works. This valid terminological differentiation does not, however, absolve the paradox of Public Service Media. The attempt to disentangle the public sphere from commercial and state interests via the institutionalisation of communicative power remains susceptible to the concentrated power of the media whose hoped-for alliance in a fight for democracy competes with its commercial appropriation. More important than the distinction between liberal or deliberative democracy is, therefore, the question of what form of democracy and participation it is that we want to safeguard in the first place. The ideals of deliberation and communication are admirable, but they start to turn in circles when confronted with a widening split between the administrative and legitimising systems in the self-effacing state under neoliberal and digital capitalism. We argued that a model of plebiscitary democracy may help us confront this split while underlining the importance of avoiding the traps of the historical compatibility of a *certain* kind of democracy with a *certain* kind of capitalism.

In the second part of our rejoinder, we linked our original criticism of the broadcast model of Public Service Media to a broader discussion on the terms and presuppositions that underlie the utopian vision of an alternative Internet. This allowed us to criticise the *Manifesto's* utopian vision not, as emphasised by Fuchs, for its lack of materiality, but for its failure to rid itself of the inherited liabilities of the deliberative ideal, rendered paradoxical by the development of both politics and capitalism.

In a third and final step, we tied these reflections to the question of the neutrality of technology. Here, we argued that technologies like Public Service Media and, more importantly, the Internet, cannot (without major contradictions) be said to 'reflect' social structures. Instead, we should focus on the changes and possibilities that these technologies may introduce within a social and economic structure. It is, therefore, permissible to subscribe to a mutability of the Internet while simultaneously questioning the benefits that such mutability may allow for.

Even if the insistence on certain paradoxes, discrepancies and differences developed by these three sections may seem hair-splitting and even heretical at times, it is

important to keep in mind that we are aiming for the same goals: the subsumption of media under democratic objectives, the negotiation of what technology can and ought to do, and the transformation of political economy for the benefit of all.

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