Chapter One

Making a difference to media pluralism: a critique of the pluralistic consensus in European media policy

Kari Karppinen

Introduction

In theorizing the relationship between media and democracy, citizens' access to a wide range of information in the public sphere is unarguably a key condition. Furthermore, notions of pluralism and diversity today seem to invoke a particularly affective resonance; to an extent that they permeate much of the argumentation in current European media policy debates. Yet opinions on the meaning and nature of these values are manifold, and they embody some of central conflicts in contemporary media policy. Based on the undisputed merits of social, political and cultural pluralism, diversity and variety in the media can even be seen as desirable ends in themselves. But as McLennan (1995: 7) noted, the constitutive vagueness of pluralism as a social value gives it enough ideological flexibility so that it is capable of signifying reactionary tendencies in one phase of the debate and progressive values in the next. From the perspective of democratic theory, it has, thus, been noted that 'pluralism is currently one of those values to which everybody refers but whose meaning is unclear and far from adequately theorized' (Mouffe, 1993a: 69). In media policy, the resonance of pluralistic discourses has been exploited accordingly in arguments for various and often incompatible objectives; for free market competition, as well as further public interventions and public service obligations.

The aim of this chapter is to deconstruct some of the paradoxes involved in the use of diversity and pluralism as media policy objectives. The argument is mainly conceptual and rooted in theoretical debates on media and democracy, but the context of contemporary European media policy debates, within political decision-making processes, as well as in expert discourses of policy analysts, serves as an illustration of the conceptual frameworks being adopted by different actors.

In both political and analytical discourses, the concepts of media pluralism and media diversity are used more or less synonymously, raising some confusion regarding the difference, or a possible hierarchy, between the two concepts. Although the purpose here is not to offer any new systematic definitions, the notion of media diversity is generally used in a more empirical or tangible

meaning, whereas pluralism refers to a more diffuse societal value or an underlying orientation. In the broadest sense, the concept of media diversity refers to the heterogeneity on the level of contents, outlets, ownership or any other aspect of the media deemed relevant. Respectively, different frameworks have been suggested to analyze its different subcomponents such as source, content and exposure diversity, as well as their mutual hierarchies and relations (see McQuail, 1992; Napoli, 1999; Hellman, 2001; Doyle, 2002). In any case, both function as umbrella terms or conceptual categories whose fundamental ambiguousness and indeterminacy is the very focus of this chapter.

In this chapter, the focus lies on the definitional power involved in political uses of pluralism and diversity. Of course, the contestation over politically and ethically charged concepts is not limited to these, but is rather characteristic of the recent debates around media governance, on the national, European and global level. Similar observations could thus be made of struggles around a number of concepts such as freedom, access or any other concept that is central to the debates on communication rights and citizenship. As such, the contestation of normative concepts and the fact that they can easily be remoulded for various political purposes is not foreign, or undesirable, to any sector of politics. According to Rose and Miller (1992: 178), political discourse is by definition 'a domain for the formulation and justification of idealized schemata for representing reality, analyzing it and rectifying it'. From this perspective, analyzing policy is not so much about what concepts or words, such as freedom, diversity or democracy, mean but rather of analyzing what they do, the way they function in connection with other elements, what they make possible, the sentiments they mobilize and regimes of truth they constitute (Rose, 1999: 29–30). In accordance, the intention here is not to seek the foundations of concepts or to offer new definitions, but to find contradictions, ambiguities and instances of definitional power in their current use in politics. The purpose of this chapter is, thus, to argue for a more reflexive, open-ended understanding of pluralism as a media policy value. Equally, the contribution can be conceived as an attempt at scholarly self-reflection since academic research clearly is one of the main institutions of intellectual machinery that produce the conceptual schemata of political discourse.

Pluralism as an ambiguous social value

Of course, the emphasis on pluralism and diversity as political values is nothing new. Premised on the epistemological impossibility of unambiguously establishing truth, right or good, especially in social and political affairs, pluralism is one of the constitutive tenets of liberal democracy. According to Mouffe (2000: 18), the acceptance of pluralism, understood as 'the end of a substantive idea of the good life', is the most important single defining feature of modern liberal democracy that differentiates it from ancient models of democracy. In this

sense, pluralism is understood not merely as a fact, something that must be dealt with, but rather as an axiological principle that is 'constitutive at the conceptual level of the very nature of modern democracy and considered as something that we should celebrate and enhance' (Mouffe, 2000: 19). From a Liberal perspective and in contrast with more community-centred or unitary views of society, pluralism and conflict are seen as fruitful and as being a necessary condition of human progress. Antagonism is seen as mediating progress, and the clash of divergent opinions and interests, in the realm of argument, in economic competition, and struggles in political domain, can be seen as inherently positive (Bobbio, 1990: 21–24).

In other words, pluralism, in whatever field of enquiry, refers to a theorized preference for multiplicity over unicity and diversity over uniformity. In this sense, almost all particular discourses could be conceived as reflecting some aspect of the pluralism/monism interface. Similarly, pluralism is conceived here more as a general intellectual orientation than a specific school of thought or ideology, and the specific manifestations of this orientation would, thus, be expected to change depending on the context.

At the moment though, pluralism would seem to have as good a claim as any other principle for the status of a general ordering moral principle in cultural matters. According to a number of authors, accounting for a radical socio-political pluralism and accepting multiplicity and pluralism in all social experiences, identities, aesthetics and moral standards have become the main thrusts of social and political theory (see McLennan, 1995). In part, this emphasis runs parallel to the general postmodern suspicion of universalism and unifying discourses in general. Hence, the attraction of pluralism in media policy would seem to be closely linked to the attacks on universal quality criteria or other unambiguous scales for assessing media performance. Respectively, it can be argued that the normative theories and concepts on which media policy lean have generally taken a marked pluralistic or anti-essentialist turn in recent decades. Instead of a singular notion of the public sphere, national culture or the common good, theorists today prefer stressing the plurality of public spheres, politics of difference, and the complexity of ways in which the media can contribute to democracy (see Keane, 1992, 2000; Fraser, 1992; Mouffe, 2000; Jacka 2003). In the vein of anti-essentialism, Keane (1992), for instance, has argued that political values of democracy and freedom of speech themselves should be conceived as means and necessary preconditions of protecting philosophical and political pluralism, rather than as inherent principles themselves.

This trend, within which the notions of quality, cultural value or public interest are increasingly conceived in a relativist manner, directly affects media and cultural policy by dodging the paternalism of the 'old paradigm of media policy'. With the idea that all forms of culture contain their own criteria of quality and no definition of quality can legitimately repudiate another, Nielsen (2003: 238)

argues that the universal basis for defining cultural quality has unavoidably been broken. This applies particularly well to the sphere of media where the paternalism and elitism often associated with traditional public service values have come under increasing criticism, consequently spurring the need for new legitimating principles. In television policy, the use of the term media pluralism is thus linked to the debates about deregulation of electronic media that began around Europe in the 1980s, and it was in policy-making responses to the expansion of commercial broadcasting that media pluralism began to gain more and more prominence in policy debates (Collins, 1998: 62; Gibbons, 2000).

In any case, pluralism – understood here as a positive affirmation of multiplicity and heterogeneity – is something that has a distinctively affective resonance and within this 'pluralistic consensus', it might seem that all things plural, diverse and open ended are to be regarded as inherently good. But as McLennan (1995) has pointed out, in deconstructing pluralism, we are faced with questions such as Is there not a point at which healthy diversity turns into unhealthy dissonance? Does pluralism mean that anything goes? And what exactly are the criteria for stopping the potentially endless multiplication of valid ideas? Particularly in terms of the media, the unsolved problem remains, how to conceptualize the need for pluralism and diversity, inherent in all normative accounts of the public sphere, without falling in the trap of relativism, indifference and an unquestioning acceptance of market-driven difference and consumerism.

Without objecting to the ideas of diversity and pluralism themselves, it is rather easy to notice that cultural and political pluralism and diversity have a tendency to turn sacrosanct and somehow flat; politics of difference are in danger of blurring into politics of indifference. As McLennan (1995: 83) notes, although pluralism and multiplicity have been revived to counteract the greyness of modernist politics, the same principles can themselves turn into just another ontological or methodological absolute, into new privileged all-purpose abstractions.

In this chapter, a position is defended that goes against the tendency to take for granted that even in their contestedness and diffuse uses of variety and diversity, there lie some common pluralistic values or an unproblematic democratic ideal of a 'pluralistic public sphere'. Pluralism – as a concept – clearly alludes to objectivity and neutrality that seem to transcend the dilemmas inherent in terms such as quality or social responsibility in assessing media performance. While this makes it more compatible with both the needs of technocratic expert assessment and the broader ideology of anti-paternalism and multiculturalism, it can also be argued that this inclusiveness and indeterminacy serves to mask political conflicts and antagonisms in media policy and is thereby often obscuring the properly political or normative aspects of evaluating media performance and setting policy objectives.

However, this chapter is not an attempt to define but rather to re-politicize or radicalize the notions of media pluralism and diversity. This will be illustrated by analyzing briefly the contestation of these concepts in general European media policy debates, as well as in expert discourses, in which diversity is increasingly conceptualized as a measurable assessment criterion for media policy. In contrast to this tendency, it will be argued that instead of seeing diversity as a neutral performance indicator, there is a need to retain the oppositional or radical character of pluralistic orientation, to pay attention to the wider issues of media power and promote not only a plurality of media outlets, but also a plurality of perspectives in assessing those structures.

In particular, it will be argued that the failure to see the contested nature of these values contributes to the general de-politicization and technocratization of public policy. Following Nielsen's critique (2003) of evaluation practices in cultural policy, it can be argued that a formal and technocratic control discourse, with no reference to the general normative debate on the functions of the public sphere and the media, can have comprehensive consequences. These would potentially include weak public debates on the normative issues related to the organization and tasks of the media, as well as arbitrariness and unintentional consequences in setting policy objectives. Instead, there is a need for reflection of evaluation criteria, such as diversity, in relation to overall socio-political goals for the public regulation of the media. Above all, there is a need to discuss the underlying overall rationales of media policies, such as supporting a pluralistic public sphere, and their relation to other objectives such as economic growth or political integration. The obsession with objective or unambiguous criteria in policy analysis and decision-making easily obscures often contradictory goals whose relative priorities need to be politically settled.

Diversity and the structure of differences

Is more diversity always better? Based on any discussion of pluralism as a social or philosophical value, the belief that it can be unambiguously turned into a linear variable is easy enough to repudiate. While the notion of media diversity clearly denotes heterogeneity on some level, it can be defined in any number of ways and it can refer to any aspect of the media: sources, outlets, opinions as well as genres and representations. In debates on media policy, diversity can refer to the extent in which media contents reflect and serve various interests and opinions of the public, or it can refer to the general diffusion of media power in society on the level of ownership, economic structures, and political influence. Considering the variety of possible definitions, empirical evidence on the relations of different aspects of diversity tends to be very ambiguous as well. The relationship between the number of media outlets, the diversity (however defined) of available content, and the actual content that is being provided is all but straight-forward, as is shown by a number of contradictory

and ambiguous studies on the effects of competition and ownership structures on content (see Meier and Trappel, 1998; Doyle, 2002; van der Wurff, 2004; Aslama *et al.*, 2004). For instance, it is entirely possible that market competition would enhance the number and variety of program types and genres available to the public, while at the same time reducing the diversity of political views or cultural representation or even excluding some contentious issues altogether. Thus, it needs to be recognized that any act of constructing the differences against which diversity is analyzed or measured is itself an act of power.

Theoretically, this has especially been stressed by Mouffe (2000) who explicitly denies the type of extreme pluralism that valorizes all forms of difference and espouses heterogeneity without any limits, because for her, such pluralism crucially misses the dimension of the *political*. Differences need to be constructed before they can be measured, and because of its refusal to acknowledge the relations of power involved in all 'constructions of differences', such naive pluralism is actually compatible with the liberal evasion of politics, converging with the typical liberal illusion of pluralism without antagonisms (Mouffe, 2000: 20).

It is clear that there are no absolute means to define or measure media diversity or pluralism, but rather they are only intelligible in relation to some criteria and definitions that are deemed more important than others. As Van Cuilenburg (1998) puts it, media diversity always has to be 'gauged' in some way to the variations in social reality. The question then arises, how to conceptualize this relationship. How are the differences – against which diversity is examined – constructed, institutionalized, and operationalized?

Although often presented as an end in itself, speaking of pluralism and diversity in any political context always requires a frame of reference in which it makes (political) sense. Most empirical studies usually follow or modify McQuail's (1992: 144–145) conceptualization in which the media is seen to contribute to pluralism in three ways: (1) by reflecting proportionately existing differences in society, (2) by giving equal access to any different points of view, or (3) by offering a wide range of choice for individuals. Each of these frames implies a different interpretation of the meaning of media diversity and the standard by which it should be assessed. Most empirical approaches, however, are based solely on the third, liberal freedom of choice perspective, while political arguments would seem to rely equally on the broader conceptions of pluralism and reflection of social and cultural differences. Respectively, choice is usually discussed in terms of the market – as expressed through the metaphor 'the free marketplace of ideas', where the limits and criteria are set by free competition and consumer choice. Social scientists, critical of these market-oriented models, have instead privileged the neo-Habermasian perspective of the public sphere as a favorite frame of reference in which the need for plurality

of political views and social perspectives is conceptualized as part of rational democratic public deliberation (see Calhoun, 1992; Dahlgren, 1995, 2004; Venturelli, 1998).

The marketplace model and public sphere approach, thus, rely on very different political rationalities in interpreting diversity and pluralism as media policy goals. While the former is based on competition and freedom of choice, the latter emphasizes broader defence of 'principled pluralism', an attempt to serve the whole society with various political views and cultural values.

Further challenges to the notion of media diversity are of course posed by technological developments and the complexity of the contemporary media landscape. In particular, the suggested shift from the mass broadcasting model to a more differentiated and individualized narrow-cast model of communication only adds to the blurring of the 'old' dichotomy between public and private communication. Although the technological development would seemingly diversify the uses of media, it has also brought about concerns over fragmentation, extreme individualism, loss of common public platforms, and their consequences for the public sphere (see Gitlin, 1998). Van Cuilenburg (1998: 41) has presented some of these problems in 'diversity paradoxes', contradictions between the aspects of diversity that cannot be reconciled. For instance, the aim of increasing proportionate representation of social interests might not be compatible with ideal openness to new ideas, and increased consumer choice does not necessarily increase the visibility of minorities. The explosion of information increases choice, but also leads to high degrees of information waste and to an overload of information. Even though the expansion of channels might lead to increased choice, there is no corresponding effect on the citizens' access to relevant information. On the contrary, increase in the diversity of supply may even reduce the actual consumption of diversity (Gibbons, 2000: 308–311; Van der Wurff, 2004: 216).

Besides this, another tension can be identified, namely between two basic functions of the media in a democratic society; pluralism, and integration. The media are often seen as a central tool for creating a common culture, constructing a national identity, or a shared arena for public debate, values that would seem to be in contradiction with the strong pluralist agenda. This relates to the idea in political theory that at some point, the emphasis on diversity and pluralism runs against the imaginary presuppositions of democracy itself and that there is an inherent tension between pluralism and 'publicness' (McLennan, 1995: 92). This in turn reflects what Mouffe (2000: 64) calls 'the democratic paradox'; how to envisage a form of commonality strong enough to institute a 'demos', but nevertheless compatible with true religious, moral, cultural, and political pluralism?

In particular, with the media market increasingly being structured into smaller segments and citizens getting less and less exposed to competing views and

unnoticed problems, there is a genuine fear that polarization of media consumption may lead to unwanted social fragmentation or 'balkanization' of the public, which contrasts with the traditional republican ideal of a large and heterogeneous public sphere. Based on these paradoxes, Sunstein (2003: 95) claims that the public sphere requires 'appropriate heterogeneity', thereby acknowledging that while all arguments can never be heard, the public sphere is above all a domain in which multiple perspectives should openly engage. For Sunstein (2002: 285), such a system of engagement between differing views should rely on something other than unrestricted individual choices. Citizens should, therefore, not only fall back on a range of common experiences, but should also be exposed to materials and information that they would not have chosen in advance. Similarly, Nielsen (2003: 243) declares the purpose of cultural policy rather high mindedly:

> *By virtue of its empowering and enlightening objective, public cultural policy cannot be content with works or activities that only aim to please and confirm superficial preferences and opinions. On the contrary, an important element in the practice of public cultural policy is to create activities that challenge these immediate private preferences, and a central criterion for success and for quality, will be precisely whether these activities are capable of facilitating experimental processes that open the mind and senses of the public to something they didn't know they wanted.*

What all these concerns express is that the varied functions of the media cannot merely be reduced to choice and satisfaction of individual preferences. So pluralism cannot be reduced merely to diversity of options as such, it is as much about a system of representation within a given society that allows for different political viewpoints and different forms of expression to be visible within the public sphere (Doyle, 2002: 14). Increases in the information available to citizens highlight the view that an increase in outlets or channels as such is not really relevant in view of a pluralistic public sphere, but that the processes of political and social representation are still central to the justification of media policies and still bear relevance to the discussion of media pluralism.

Naivety of free choice

As the political diversity discourse already indicates, the central metaphors through which almost all public policy is conceived today are the marketplace and 'choice'. As Bauman (1997: 93) puts it, freedom of choice has become the main stratifying variable in our multi-dimensionally stratified societies to an extent that making choices is everybody's fate. Only the ranges of realistic choices differ and so do the resources needed to make them.

In the tradition of the critical Political Economy of the media, models based on free competition and choice have long been criticized for ignoring that choice is always pre-structured by the conditions of competition. The belief that consumer choice directs the media in accordance with the general will of the people misses that the influence of the consumer is passive, reactive rather than pro-active, and the extent of alternatives for choice is always limited by the structural effects, such as the concentration of ownership, high costs for market entry, advertizing, unequal representations, and political influences (Curran, 2002: 227–230). Bauman (1999: 73–78) argues that choice is always pre-structured by processes of pre-selection. Throughout modernity, the principal tool for 'setting the agenda for choice' has been legislation and the rule of law. Today political institutions are increasingly abandoning this tool. However, this 'liberalization' does not necessarily mean that freedom of choice is expanding, merely that the power of pre-selection is being ceded to other than political institutions, above all the markets themselves. Consequently, the code or criteria of pre-selection is changing too, as are the values towards which choosers are trained to orient their choices. In this regard, short-term pleasure, hedonism, entertainment, and other market-generated needs come to occupy a superior place. Thus, Bauman argues that the late-modern emphasis on freedom of choice and individual autonomy has not really increased individual freedom. On the contrary, it has instead lead to 'unfreedom', to the transformation of the political citizen into a consumer of market goods.

The simplistic equation of media diversity to market competition and free choice thus obviously fails to take into account the wider relations of power in which the media are situated. Furthermore, contrary to the discourse of 'the free marketplace of ideas' – in which the market is seen as self-regulating and spontaneous mediator – the market itself is a politically designed institution, not a homogenous, unstructured, and unregulated natural entity. The actual shape of the markets is most often crafted by political and legal regulation, and it hardly emerges spontaneously as a neutral mediator of civil society. The market also imposes its own criteria of pre-selection that necessarily limits the range of public choices. Yet it seems that despite the divergent political rationalities, the discourse of consumer choice has become prevalent enough to force even the defenders of public service media to adapt to it too. Symptomatic to the commodification of politics and media, economic modes of argumentation and economic vocabularies have come to dominate European media politics in general and 'freedom of choice for consumers', in particular, has become an important signifier on which arguments are based when deciding on channel licenses, norms of regulation, or performance assessment (see Pauwels, 1998; Venturelli, 1998; Hellman, 1999; Van Cuilenburg and McQuail, 2003).

The implication of this in terms of media policy is that given its own illusion of neutrality, the neo-liberal praise of individual choice does not support any

collective definition of 'quality' over any others. Still, arguing for negative freedom by invoking the value pluralism may consequently result in the contrary: individual choices, perfectly reasonable in themselves, might produce a large set of social difficulties. The reactions against the dominant neo-liberal discourse, as outlined earlier, remind us that it is only through rich and secure cultural structure that people can become aware of the options available to them in the first place. Consequently, there are important differences between consumer sovereignty and the democratic roots of media freedom and pluralism (see Sunstein, 2002: 294–295). On the one hand, the very idea of consumer sovereignty, underpinning the free markets logic, implies that consumers should increasingly 'get what they want' through freedom of choice in the marketplace, constrained only by prices and their own requirements and holdings. The concept of political sovereignty, on the other hand, builds on a very different foundation, since it does not take individual tastes or requirements as fixed or given, and it prioritizes social requirements such as democratic self-government and public deliberation.

However, conceiving social differences as categorical or static, something that can be unambiguously captured by institutional arrangements, as in the Public Service Broadcasters' (PSB) claims to serve all of the people all the time, is at least as problematic. Instead, as Keane (1992: 117) has acknowledged, it is self-evident that the repertoire of public service programmes, or any other media, can never exhaust the multitude of publics in a complex pluralist society. Instead, the claim to 'balance' is always a specific defence of virtual representation of a fictive whole. As such, this commitment to balance itself will, in some cases, close off contentious, unbalanced views, favor representatives of established social groups, and in effect 'stabilize difference'.

Thus, there is a familiar twin trap of relativism and indifference on the one hand, and foundationalism and statism on the other. Of course, as a partial answer to this, theories of media and democracy, such as the one developed by Keane, typically promote the autonomy of civil society, which is regarded as a realm of spontaneous action and a marker for a more differentiated and pluralistic system of power. While not a panacea, this would at least seem to offer some basis for making political practices more inclusive and empowering less privileged participants. The main point here, however, is to stress that the meaning of pluralism is always context dependent, and not intelligible as an absolute or linear variable.

Political appeal of diversity discourse

The more positive the images associated with a certain concept are, the more meaningful it becomes to discern the definitional power that underlies its political uses. It, thus, remains relevant to assess which articulations of media pluralism and diversity become hegemonic, and on which kind of political rationalities they rely, for these are rarely without political consequences. Taking

notice of this, Gibbons (2000: 307) suggested that media diversity itself could serve as a kind of transitional concept that conveniently assists a shift from the public service dominance to the market-driven approach in European media policy. This is because the dominant articulations of the concept frame the discussion on the democratic role of the media as a reasonable difference of opinion between two different ways of achieving the same goal (diversity of media supply). Implicit in such discourses, he argues, is the idea that through development of the new media and increased competition, the problems of market failure might be corrected and the special need for public regulation would become obsolete.

This concurs, in many ways, with the concept of 'vehicular ideas', which Osbourne (2004: 441) defines as practical, usable propellants that move things along and discursively get us from one place to another. As such, vehicular ideas are contrasted to 'big ideas' or 'grand narratives' and associated with the move from the ideological to the informational politics (Osbourne, 2004: 443; see also Lash, 2002). To modify Marx's phrase that theory becomes a material force when it grips the masses, one could claim today that theoretical ideas become material forces when they are adopted into the evaluation jargon of the bureaucracy in dire need of explanatory frameworks. Furthermore, by drawing from the recent research into the role of ideas and concepts in public policy, it can be argued that the 'success' of political ideas and paradigms often rely, not on grand ideological clashes, but on their capability to become institutionalized and embedded within the norms, standard practices and calculations of policy-making and policy-makers (see Hay, 2004).

This would seem to be in accordance with Van Cuilenburg and McQuail's (2003) suggestion that explicit references to moral and normative components in European media policy debates have largely been supplanted by more market-oriented and supposedly more pragmatic concerns. The socio-political media policy paradigm, which was shaped by social and democratic struggles induced by normative concerns relating to the democratic and social responsibilities of the media, has been replaced by a new paradigm that emphasizes mainly technical and economic considerations. Such considerations are usually presented as pragmatic, problem-oriented, and unlike the political practice illegitimately justified by ideologies, rational politics is characterized by the treatment of social problems as a matter of instrumental deduction, requiring ever-increasing expert knowledge and objective analysis. Similarly, Hay (2004) associates the institutionalization of the new neo-liberal policy paradigm with a shift from normative to more normalized and necessitarian political rationalities. Political rhetoric is increasingly couched in terms of the non-negotiable character of external, either economic or empirical-objective, imperatives, painstakingly difficult to reconcile with the various normative views on what constitutes the public interest or the common good.

Given the ambiguousness of the pluralistic values, it is thus no surprise that the construction of such necessitarian political rationalities becomes pivotal to the debates on media diversity and pluralism on the political level. Accordingly, in European media policy, the effective resonance of media pluralism has been mobilized for various and often incompatible political objectives. While well suited to the contemporary emphasis on de-centralization and multiculturalism in social theory, the 'pluralistic consensus', Nielsen (2003: 238) argues, has not immediately offered new opportunities for the orientation of public policy, but instead created an open situation in which the articulations and hegemonic definitions of pluralism and diversity were and still are contested. One powerful articulation has obviously been the equation of 'diversity' with 'freedom of choice', and the general framework of the 'free marketplace of ideas'. Within the various discourses that emphasize socio-political pluralism, the belief in social centralism, rational progress, a homogenous public, and social engineering have all come to seem politically questionable. Thus, diversity, variety, and choice are generally seen as the opposite of paternalism; constructing an image of media history as a continuum from public regulation and planning towards ever-increasing freedom of choice for the consumer and freedom of operation for the industry (see Curran, 2002).

However, as influential as it has been, the neo-liberal articulation of diversity and the market is not unquestioned. Proponents of public service broadcasting in particular have adopted diversity and pluralism as the core of their remit and consequently promoted a more interventionist articulation of diversity (Collins, 1998: 62). The protocol of the Treaty of Amsterdam of the European Union, for instance, states that 'the system of public broadcasting in the Member States is directly related to the democratic, social and cultural needs of each society and to the need to preserve media pluralism' (Harrison and Woods, 2001). Similarly, the Council of Europe and the European Parliament have repeatedly promoted pluralism and diversity as key public interest values that necessitate intervention in the media market in general and give support to public service broadcasting in particular (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 1996; Collins, 1998; Harrison and Woods, 2001; Sarikakis, 2004).

Similarly, national legislations around Europe refer to diversity and pluralism as both general principles of media policy and specific justifications or demands for public service broadcasting. Thus, the idea that democracy and public deliberation require a variety of opinions and views from diverse media sources certainly seems beyond dispute in contemporary European debate on media policy. What they mean in any given context, however, is not nearly as clear. The battling rationales of the free marketplace and the public service approach, thus, clearly attest to an inevitable tension between freedom in the negative sense and any positive social goals associated with media diversity. The free market and public service discourses rely on very different political paradigms

when interpreting diversity and pluralism as media policy goals. The former is based on competition and freedom of choice and the latter on a much broader defence of 'principled pluralism', an attempt to serve the whole society with various political views and cultural values (Van Loon, 2000; Harrison and Woods, 2001; Hellman, 2001).

The definitional and discursive power that frames the boundaries of political discussion also clearly shows in the vicissitudes of media policy in the European Union. While the European Parliament consistently raised the issue of media pluralism to the Commission since the early 1990s, the attempts to build on a political and cultural definition of pluralism and diversity have repeatedly failed due to the opposition of industry groups and the Commission, as well as their inability to redefine the terms of the debate (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 1996; Sarikakis, 2004). First, the issues of pluralism and independence of the media have been relegated under competition policy, marginalizing any problems specific to the media sector (Doyle, 1997, 2002). Second, when dealing explicitly with media contents, diversity has been defined as a choice between programme types or genres, raising an immediate concern regarding the reduction of the public service remit to produce content that is not profitable or taken care of by the commercial content providers (Feintuck, 1999: 59–61; Harrison and Woods, 2001). Internationally, similar definitional struggles have recently become prominent in the debates of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions and in its wording regarding media freedom and the possible need for positive intervention in the market to promote cultural diversity.

Appeal of empirical closure

Parallel to the struggles over the meaning and connotations of pluralistic values, there is also an opposite tendency to search unambiguous and objective definitions. According to Napoli (1999), media diversity is increasingly treated as a measurable concept, a tangible and empirically assessable construct, rather than a justification for policy initiatives or another abstract dimension of media freedom. This has taken place to an extent that there is now an established field of academic empirical diversity research in addition to the governmental and regulatory commissioned studies on the diversity of television programming (see Napoli, 1999; Hellman, 2001; Aslama *et al.*, 2004; van der Wurff, 2004). In addition to the revival of pluralism in social thought, the popularity of the diversity discourse can also be related to the attraction of neutrality and objectivity in the criteria for evaluating public policy. Despite the paradoxes outlined earlier, pluralism and diversity seem markedly more neutral and less value dependent than the notions of quality or social responsibility, for instance, making them resistant to any remnants of paternalism in media and cultural policy.

Consequently, media diversity is more and more treated in the administrative discourse as an empirical construct, an indicator amenable to objective measurement. Indicators used in such administrative media performance assessment around Europe vary from very elaborate frameworks of qualitative and quantitative assessment to rough calculations of programme type diversity (see Hellman, 2001; Bardoel, *et al*., 2005; Coppens, 2005). In any case, it seems that the idea of performance assessment based on 'reliable and objective evidence' is now firmly embedded in European media policy too, as it has been in the United States for some time now (see Howley, 2005). However, in the United States the demand for objective and reliable empirical evidence in assessing diversity as a policy goal has also met with resistance from various public interest groups who claim that the reduction of diversity to a single quantitative measure fails to account for the complexities of the media landscape and substitutes mechanical devices for serious analysis of media power (Howley, 2005: 103–104).

Moreover, it needs to be noted that empirical definitions and assessments of diversity are hardly ever neutral any more than its variety of political uses are. The trend of developing more and more specific objectives and performance criteria has profound effects on public service broadcasting in Europe. In part, this new accountability can be attributed to the increased criticism and scrutiny of PSB in the European Union and by the private broadcasting lobby. Especially, the concerns related to competition policy and common market have raised the need to develop tangible criteria to distinguish the domain of public regulation as an exemption from the market principles (Harrison and Woods, 2001: 499; Syvertsen, 2003: 167–168; Coppens, 2005). Moreover, the technocratic trends in media and cultural policy have been associated with a more general set of ideas about the reorganization of the public sector, known as 'the new public management', the roots of which can be traced back to the diminishing possibilities of political decisions to shape policy and the increasing needs to control social complexity (Nielsen, 2003; McGuigan, 2004). According to Nielsen (2003: 240), this has created a need for new administrative instruments of control, 'disciplining mechanisms that formally, but potentially also in practice, ensure central government's continued control over the tasks it has delegated to decentralized levels'.

It is clear that these developments are not without consequences for the classic distinction between a market-driven approach of diversity, which emphasizes choice and deregulation, and the public regulation approach, which relies on cultural–political norms of cultural diversity, civic equality, and universalism. While the market definition of diversity is rather easily quantifiable and measurable, the more qualitative and multi-faceted public service ideals clearly are not. On the contrary, the remit of public service broadcasting is especially intangible and normative, embedded in the ideas of public sphere, citizenship, pluralism, creativity, national/regional culture, all values that are notoriously

difficult to define in an unambiguous way, let alone measure empirically (see Jakubowicz, 2003; Coppens, 2005). Consequently, it is not difficult to point out several problems in the administrative discourse of diversity evaluation. To critical theorists concerned with depolitization, the emphasis on instrumental reason and expert knowledge has always been problematic. As Habermas (1996: 45) put it, rationality in the choice of means often accompanies irrationality in orientation to values, goals, and needs, essentially depriving democratic decision-making of its object. With this in mind, all attempts at defining or measuring media diversity will necessarily involve political and normative choices and contestation over the meaningful norms and criteria of setting policy goals that cannot be reduced to mere facts and figures. Thus, attempts to impose common criteria or a certain conceptual framework for analyzing media (-diversity) can be deconstructed as attempts to reach political closure, or as attempts to stabilize the political contestation and hegemonize certain specific criteria and concepts.

Towards a radical-pluralist approach

As argued earlier, values and meanings associated with pluralism and diversity are open-ended, inseparable from the broader questions of political power and social representation, and subject to continuous processes of social negotiation. It is, thus, not feasible to invoke an absolute final value or an authority (scientific, moral, or political) and to establish the relevant norms and criteria for their assessment. Instead of understanding them as linear or fixed variables, there is a need for more dynamic and contextual conceptualizations of diversity and pluralism. Furthermore, representing media diversity as a measurable variable, instead of a contested political value, turns media policy away from values and public deliberation towards instrumental rationality and technocratic decision-making. In doing so, the philosophical and political ideals that media policy declarations strive for are in danger of being reduced to mere rhetoric.

But then what? Should we give up the concept and just talk about communication freedom – which is hardly less ambiguous. After deconstructing the diversity principle in media policy from a more practical perspective, Van Cuilenburg (1998: 45) subsequently claims that diversity in information and opinion is a completely fictitious, even mythical, concept with no practical meaning in today's media environment characterized by abundance. Van Cuilenburg argues that the real issue for media policy is not lack of information, but information accessibility and openness, particularly to new and innovative ideas and opinions of minority groups.

Thus, it can be argued that in the context of continuing structural power, the emphasis should be put above all on the inclusiveness of the public sphere, access to alternative voices, and contestability of all hegemonic structures; general openness instead of any tangible criteria of measurable diversity.

Similarly, Curran (2002: 236–237) argues that media pluralism should be conceived from the viewpoint of contestation that is open to different social groups to enter, rather than its traditional justification, that truth will somehow automatically arise from either free competition of ideas or open rational– critical debate. The implication of this is that a structural reform that involves levelling the field and widening social access to public debate is a key requirement of media pluralism. The task of media policy from this perspective would be to support and enlarge the principled opportunities of structurally underprivileged actors of the public sphere, create room for critical voices outside the systemic structures of the market or state bureaucracy, aiming to increase the inclusiveness, and openness of the public sphere to various forms of contestation. The debate should thus not focus on trying to measure the balance of the existing media contents, for 'balance' only makes sense from the vantage point of a certain social objectivity. Instead, the media policy debate should shift towards the structural level of media power.

However, many of the problems regarding the use of pluralism and diversity in media policy discourses, raised in this chapter, have to do with a more general problem of reflecting on values in both administrative and theoretical debates. As McQuail (1997) notes, the academic variant of media policy analysis has typically emphasized 'realism', eager to appear economically and technologically literate, and has been rather short on idealism and fundamental criticism. The reputedly more critical approaches of Cultural Studies, on the contrary, have largely shunned formal legal–economic discourses, which has often left them detached from the concrete political and regulatory concerns. Although I have emphatically criticized the way diversity is conceptualized in the administrative policy research, it is not my intention to defend any unquestioning celebration of all multiplicity and heterogeneity either, as some particular strands of Cultural Studies have done in the past. The repeated appeals to complexity, pluralism, and contingency of media culture may at their worst steer researchers away from the politically sensitive issues of media performance and the norms of evaluation.

With this, it is becoming increasingly clear that the treacherous questions of values and quality can never be totally averted in cultural evaluation and policy-making. As McQuail (1997: 49) grudgingly concedes, 'The only alternative to considered and coherent media policy seems to be the patently messy and intellectually incoherent attempt to uphold somewhat arbitrarily chosen values (with sometimes dubious undercurrents and allies)'. Although this does not sound very dignified, it captures the very basic idea of radical democratic politics. According to Keane (1992: 129), democracy is ruled by publics who make – and remake – judgements in public. That is why any system of public communication is not a 'recipe for creating a heaven of communication on earth', and it would not stifle controversies and contestations about the meaning of democracy, freedom of speech, rights, nor the criticism about paternalism or

elitism. Freedom of communication or media pluralism is, thus, not something that can be realized in a definitive or perfect sense. It is an ongoing project without an ultimate solution and a project, which constantly creates new contradictions and dilemmas.

Conclusions

If the role of ideas in politics is indeed changing from ideological to informational, or 'vehicular', it also implies new aims for the criticism of political ideas. While the point here is not to argue against the importance of media pluralism, it is important to recover the contradictions and disparities in the political uses of normatively laden concepts; to criticize the tendency of certain concepts to turn sacrosanct. In this sense, as Jacoby (1999: 33) argues, pluralism and diversity have come to form a mythology of our time:

> *[They are] blank checks payable to anyone in any amount, lacking meaning or content.… Pluralism becomes the catch-all, the alpha and omega of political thinking. Dressed up as multiculturalism, it has become the opium of disillusioned intellectuals, the ideology of an era without an ideology.*

Garnham (2000: 165–166) also stressed that moral absolutes, such as freedom of speech, are especially susceptible to being mobilized for political interests because of their unquestioned and mythological status that prevents the critical examination of their premises. Thus, the core argument of this chapter is that the questions of media structure and performance are essentially political and ideological questions that imply a dialogue or conflict between different values. Democratization of communication is not seen as a one-way street but a process of contestation and negotiation.

In this sense, the concept of media pluralism itself does not conceptually offer much unambiguous basis for the demands of democratic politics on the media but is rather in itself an object of political contestation. Indeed, McLennan (1995: 85) has appositely argued that the force of any brand of pluralistic discourses depends on its ability to problematize some prevailing 'monistic' orthodoxy. In that sense, pluralism in general is a 'generic concept' or 'an intellectual syndrome', rather than a fixed paradigm or tradition. Therefore, it is inevitable that its precise connotations and implications vary according to the context. Ironically enough though, the 'pluralistic consensus' itself seems to have become the monistic orthodoxy of today's media policy.

Following a more radical pluralist orientation, Keane (1991, 1992) and Curran (2002), for instance, have suggested that all democratic media–political tools and forms of public intervention in the media can be conceived as correctives against the wishful belief in the decentralized anonymity of the market or any other superior or natural self-correcting mechanisms. Thus, it

needs to be recognized that any system depends on a certain social objectivity and differentiation, to construct a system of social representation within which diversity and pluralism make sense. From this perspective, it can be argued that freedom of communication and media pluralism in a critical sense are jeopardized more than anything by cost-benefit analyzes and the search for general and substantive criteria for defining or measuring them. Instead, it has been argued that in pluralistic democratic systems, the scope and meaning of these values, as well as the process of representation, will inevitably be the object of continuous contentious, political struggles.

Respectively, the choices made to assess the state of various demands posed to the structure of communication will depend on different visions of society and the public sphere. To this end, there have been numerous calls, on which the arguments in this chapter also rely, in political theory to return to a more normative (and democratic) form of politics (Mouffe, 1993b; Hay, 2004). What these perspectives lament is the incapacity of facing and dealing with societal problems in political terms, that is requiring not simply technical, but proper political decisions, which are made between real alternatives and which imply the availability of conflicting, but legitimate projects on how to organize common affairs. In line with this, it can be argued that one of the main ways of coping with the complexities of the current media system has been to hide behind 'pluralism' and 'diversity' as supposedly neutral values that somehow transcend the problems of responsibility, quality, truth, or rationality. This chapter sets out to demystify and deconstruct some of the rationalist premises on which public legitimation of media policy is based and highlight the inherent contestability of normative concepts such as media freedom, pluralism, or diversity. For, after a closer look, it becomes evident that claims to procedural and substantial neutrality that often underlie the debate on pluralism and media diversity are more difficult to separate from the political judgements they rely on.

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