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Public space and changes in communication and cultural industries

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For communication political economy – trend to which most researchers, who have developed cultural industries theory, are linked – communication, information and cultural industries cannot, of course, be analyzed and studied from the only classical industrial economy models, because of their sectors' strictly economic specificities, but also particularly because of the role they play in the political, social and cultural life of a country. Even if it is obvious, it has to be said again that media are not only producers and entertainment distributors. They are also information sources as well as public opinion elaboration places.

Therefore, it makes sense to think that transformations that take place in communication and cultural industrial sectors have repercussions on a country's political life. It's the subject I intend to examine in this paper. My analysis will develop in three parts. The first one will try to outline the connection issue between communication and democracy; the second one, to clarify my approach and the third to "reexamine" the public space concept. The analysis developed in this third part, which in fact is at the core of my reflexion, will, in turn, be divided into three points:

- beyond space metaphor;
- beyond idealistic rationalism;
- private and public reconfiguration.

As a conclusion, I will quickly bring up the directions in which I intend to carry on my research.

1. COMMUNICATION AND DEMOCRACY

Democracy is essentially a system based on law: right to vote, information right, freedom of expression, discussion and decision rules and procedures. And, you have to be blind or innocent to ignore that it has also something to do with socio-economic determinants: defense of class or corporatist interests, access to financial means, in order to run an election campaign, access to information, knowledge and media property, etc. Democratic life is also utterly a communication matter. Inquiring, discussing, forming an opinion and expressing it in public, trying to convince others and win them over to one's positions, constitute as many communication and information exercises. The right on which it is based is mainly a communication right and the socio-economic determinants it is dependent on, fundamentally concern access to information and communication means use. Communication and information constitute essential components of democratic life, which would be unthinkable without freedom of expression and free flow of pluralistic and independent information. A society's democratic life quality has something to do with its information system vitality and health.

Social sciences in general and particularly communication sciences have developed various theories and defined many concepts in order to think and analyse information and communication meaning, role and position in democratic systems'creation and evolution. Among the whole concepts, those of space, opinion and public sector hold an outstanding position. I will particularly study here the public space one.

It seems plausible to imagine that space, opinion and public sectors structuration and functioning are modified by technological innovation and media world changes. Habermas (1992, p. 173) writes that public space "is, in the mean time, prestructured and dominated by mass media"? But his argument is not only focused on media transformations. Doesn't it aim at explaining public space restructuring during the shift from a political system to another, from a bourgeois constitutional State to social State mass democracies?

As for Bernard Miège (1977), he makes a distinction between four action models in democratic societies'public space, defined from and about dominating communication techniques in a determined time and place:

- papers specializing in political analysis and commentaries;
- mass business papers;
- audiovisual mass media;
- widespread public relations.

In his most recent book, *Communication-information as a knowledge object*, he wonders about a fifth model possibility that would result from society *informationnalization*¹.

Still, the question to ask is more broadly whether and to what extent cultural, social, economic and technic changes that affect communication and cultural industries have an influence on democratic life processes. Therefore, I postulate the existence of a link between the two. However, I am careful not to consider it as linear, exclusive and univocal. Media and cultural industries'changes have got coverage in the public sphere, but they do not constitute the only transformation factor of it, and I don't think that each technological innovation produces a totally different public space type.

What is there to understand by "changes" in the communication and cultural industries sector? I am interested here in changes that significantly modify these industries'functioning and structure, at the consumption, distribution and production level and that represent long and medium lasting trends.

¹ Neologism proposed by Bernard Miège himself in an article published in *Sciences de la société* review, 1999.

The expressions “significantly” and “long and medium duration” refer to major transformations that have long-lasting consequences, but they are obviously composed of a certain amount of inaccuracy that inevitably hand over to subjective interpretation.

There have been numerous changes over the past three decades. Let’s mention, among them, property increasing concentration, network expansion and increased number of services, cultural practices individualization, public and private sphere recomposition, neoliberal ideology hegemony and the value decline related to public sector, the content and media standard evolution, the kind of relations media keep with their audiences, etc.

All these various changes have more or less deeply influenced communication and information position and role in democratic life². For those who declare and celebrate the electronic democracy advent, it is an essentially positive evolution. Thanks to new networks, citizens have, as never before, access to all necessary information and have at their disposal means to express and spread their viewpoints. Others make a more pessimistic diagnosis. Media concentration in the hands of a few big groups, the extensive use of advertising and marketing techniques, the recourse to empty slogans and to attractive pictures have suppressed any serious public debate.

Recent evolutions are certainly being questioned. Is there still a worthy of the name public space? Are general interest questions discussed in it? Is it a matter of only one or numerous public spaces? Does a global public space exist?

The ambition that motivates my thought is double. First, I intend, and that’ll take some doing, to reach the clearest understanding possible of communication and information functioning methods in contemporary democracies, to take apart its mechanisms, to show its logic and to expose its contradictions. Then, it’s my ambition to take up a huge challenge, that is identifying liberation and exceeding avenues and defining a critical position from a double refusal: that of backing the *statu quo* in the name of a paralyzing realism and that of taking refuge in just an as much futile idealism because out of touch with reality. In short, I try to clear the political economy’s point of view concerning the communication and information role and position in democratic societies, in the mutation context implying communication and cultural industries over a few decades. For that, it would be necessary to successively carry out a reappraisal of space concepts, public opinion and services that constitute, in my view, an essential trilogy to think connection between democracy, communication and information. In this article, I’ll discuss the issue from the public space concept angle. But before, some points are imperative to my approach.

² See among others GINGRAS, 1999 and VEDEL, 2003, p.243-266.

2. A critical approach

Critical approach has no longer a reputation as good as in the 60's and 70's, even in academic and intellectual circles, at least in Quebec and in Canada. Not long ago, considered as the mark of an independent and free spirit, basic goal of higher education, it is nowadays rather perceived and run down as negative, old-fashioned and depressing. In communication and information circles, creation and even "creativity", usually associated with "new media" offered possibilities, are often opposed and preferred to critical approach.

Are criticism and creation necessarily placed in an opposition relation? Are they two incompatible approaches? Some artists' work, like Fred Forest's³, for instance, show that it is nothing of the sort. Social criticism can be very well combined with artistic creation. However, that's easier said than done. Inspiration does neither comply with command, nor with vague impulse and the creative process is too badly known to be the subject of a systematic programme. On the other hand, scientific work is more formalized. Therefore, how can we characterize critical approach in communication and information sciences?

In a paper presented at the INFORCOM national conference in 1990, published in the meeting proceedings, Bernard Miège and Pierre Mœglin identify four requirements for information-communication critical research:

- Problem enrichment by the increasing number of cross approaches;
- The systematic questioning of received ideas and obvious facts;
- Theoretical elaboration that connects different analysis levels;
- A new exchange and contact type development with professionals and decision-makers.

This still topical list might undoubtedly be lengthened. I'll content myself with adding epistemological requirement. Critical analysis passes judgement and is always inevitably carried out from a point of view. Claiming to adhere to it necessarily means to distance oneself from science positivist conceptions and from neutral look pretensions. Therefore, practicing it with rigour, requires a constant epistemological effort of production conditions and presupposition questioning awareness.

³ Fred Forest's different websites, from which one can have a rather full idea of his work, are available on this email address: www.fredforest.org/

The critical approach supporters refuse to consider world order as an inevitability. They fall within a political and socio-economic change logic and try to go beyond the present situation contradictions in a permanent tension towards a greater collective and individual liberation. In this search, two traps have to be avoided because they wouldn't be able to inspire a transforming *praxis* and inevitably lead to the biggest disappointments: the golden age nostalgia and the utopian daydreaming, being both the product of an unrestrained imagination. The first attitude, turned towards an idealized past, represents a negation of history and its teaching; the second one turned towards a radiant future, mixes up irresolute aspiration to imaginary heavens and the transforming power that feeds from the exploration of what is possible.

Having said that, after all the XXth century ideological disillusionment, it is not easy to precisely work out a programme and a radical change strategy that would be convincing. Besides, is it indeed the critical analysis role in communication and information sciences? Shouldn't it leave to the politicians (parties, militants and elected representatives) the definition of such programmes and strategies? Shouldn't it, rather more simply, limit itself to the deconstruction of what appears as obvious and inevitable, as well as to identification and alternatives exposition? Such an approach is not opposed to a creative approach or to a political one. It neither substitutes itself to them. It may, however, lead to them or even initiate and feed them.

Following my predecessors' path, my own critical analysis will try to meet three requirements: attention given to experience data, strategy and mechanism deconstruction and search of firmly fixed plausible alternatives. I hope it will modestly contribute to the public space perspectives' renewal, to the role communication and information have to play in it, in order to ensure a more satisfying, fair and equitable democratic life.

3. PUBLIC SPACE

We've lost count of books and articles dealing with public space, since Jürgen Habermas has created and popularized this concept in his doctoral thesis published in 1962. He emphasized in it the advertising bourgeois principle according to which questions related to general interest and pertaining information are openly revealed and discussed by citizens in public, making public use of their reason. A principle that marks a break with the Ancien Régime, characterized by secret and the arbitrary practiced by the absolute monarchy.

Let's remind that these initial positions have later been balanced by the author himself⁴ and have been the subject of numerous critical discussions that have largely contributed to the enrichment of the public space problem. Without carrying out here an exegetic discussion about the habermassian thesis and its epigones, I think it useful for the understanding of public space's structuration and functioning in our contemporary Western societies to resume the discussion about the traps concealed in a space metaphor that sometimes hides the very disclosure process, about the idealistic characteristic of public space conception inspired by the Enlightenment, about the public and private spheres'reconstitution and about the debate role in the public opinion construction process.

3.1 Beyond space metaphor

The habermassian thesis mainly structures around the concept translated into French by the "public space"⁵ expression, a translation that underlines the spatial and nearly physical inscription of the concerned social process. The space metaphor is certainly justified from the start, in reference to these debate public places represented by literary salons, pubs, parliaments, political clubs, town and villages squares. It is in those concrete places that general interest news were read and the arguments they provoked took place.

However, this space dimension reality must not hide the more abstract social process nature implied by the public sphere notion, that essentially consists of a disclosure, general interest files made public, while previously kept secret and of a public debate aiming at seeking common good. The bourgeois *disclosure* transforms into the State what the royal power used to consider as its own prerogative. Today, disclosure still asks for all citizens' attention and assessment what the power would prefer dealing in limited specialists and decision-makers circles, during all sorts of summits (G8 Summit, FTAA, WTO, etc.).

Reminding this distinction places public space unicity debate in another perspective, that allows to find a solution to it by suppressing a false opposition. Information distribution follows different channels and is aimed at various viewers, listeners and readers'audiences. No medium can pretend reaching everybody on its own. And the discussion, when it occurs, takes place in numerous more or less isolated and interconnected groups, having more or less homogenous opinions. In this way, we can talk about a public space mutiplicity, which no doubt, has intensified with new media invention

⁴ See HABERMAS, 1992. The author acknowledges, among other things, public spheres'plurality, the existence of a plebeian public sphere, the exclusion of underprivileged men and women belonging to the bourgeois public sphere. He concludes by confessing: "In short, my diagnosis of a linear evolution from a politically active audience to a "privatist" audience, from a reasoning about culture and culture consumption, is too simplistic. I have estimated in a too pessimistic way the resistance capacity and particularly the critical potential of a pluralist and greatly diverse mass audience, that extend beyond class barriers in its cultural habits" (p.174).

⁵ The preferred translation into English is that of "public sphere".

and expansion. But, first of all, this “dividing up” derives from contemporary democratic societies’ demographic size, from their complex social structure and from interest difference that sustain their various components.

The research on *mass media* effects has, for a long time, shown the mechanism of selective exposition to information sources and to contents that correspond and confirm value choices and receivers’ ideological orientations. This process contributes to the compartmentalization of opinions where they are worked out, to social and physical spaces and to the public space segmentation. The proliferation of audiovisual and written media, as well as various more or less specialized electronic ones, favours this trend. The protean Internet itself is also a good example of the parallel coexistence, within the same technical networks, of websites that constitute as many particular *places*, of more or less public spaces since they join and initiate debates within groups of more or less numerous individuals, connected to each other.

These public sphere different segments do not necessarily communicate with each other. Each citizen at best takes part only in a few networks, some of the forums where general interest issues are discussed. The unionist gets mainly informed by media belonging to his ideological parties, visits websites and appropriate chat rooms, takes part in trade-unionist meetings and expresses himself in discussion groups belonging to his background. The boss, the executive, the farmer do as much the same in their own environment, according to the outlines of their social belonging. In this way, public space is neither unique nor homogenous. To paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu (1980) we could say that “public space does not exist”.

Public space is a philosophical abstraction, a metaphor that sends back to a communication and information process, which takes shape in various ways and places. There is not, and has ever been only plural public spaces where this same disclosure and discussion effort looking for collective solutions have constantly been at stake. The process is unique, the channels and places where it takes place are numerous, often – but not necessarily – interconnected. And this segmentation is not a consequence of only carriers and media proliferation. It is as much, or even more, the social, economic and cultural segmentation product which characterizes advanced industrial societies and the so-called information societies.

If the metaphor has to be carried on, I would say that public space is not a homogenous geometrical space, but a differentiated, organised and structured territory, as any inhabited territory, shaped by a social group whole. The public space critical analysis must give its complete position back to dialectics, location and to the bringing to light of conflicts between groups of different interests, to the exposure of one another communication strategies. Public space is, for sure, an ideological debate place. But it is also the place where power continuously tries to justify its orientations and decisions

and to rebuild its legitimacy. It is also the place where different groups confronting each other try to impose the negotiation of a compromise acceptable to their members and supported by public opinion. Public space is undoubtedly a too impersonal expression. That of public arena⁶ or stage reveal much more the struggles and the shows that stimulate it and constitute its dimensions as real as discussion.

3.2 Beyond idealistic rationalism

In the Enlightenment tradition, public space must have been conceived as a reason public practice place, aiming at reaching common good. It was presupposed that anyone endowed with reason, sufficiently well-bred and informed, could disregard his class or personal interests, think with complete objectivity and take the best decisions, according to general interest. That is just typical of a rationalist conception of democratic functioning based on a knowledge metaphysical approach and an idealistic conception of human nature. The XVIIIth century philosophers sincerely believed in the possibility of reaching the truth through logical reasoning and they thought that, in the presence of that reasoning, a gentleman could only assent to that truth. Contemporary epistemology does no longer support such beliefs. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle and Niels Bohr's quantum mechanism have even upset our world physical law representations. The radical relativism has even become for a lot of people a new creed and the "each one his truth", a common expression used also by the youngest ones. The relation to the truth is no longer approved unanimously, that's putting it mildly. In these times that some qualify as post-modern, nearly no one believes in a democratic debate possibility where only rational arguments would come up. "Common good" and "general interest" expressions are still in use, but have very different meanings than those referring to natural laws and objective truth.

Protest, confrontation, power struggle, seduction, negotiation and public opinion building up are reference terms as important as that of discussion for the understanding of public space functioning in contemporary democratic societies. Rational argument has not got off stage. It is still necessary, but no longer sufficient.

In fact, public space is as much, or even more a power struggle place than a search for consensus one; as much or even more a persuasion, seduction and negotiation place than an argumentation one. Political strategists have well understood that for already many decades, they, who talk about War

⁶ This expression is used by Habermas himself : « Public space, which is, in the same time, prestructured and dominated by mass media, has become a real arena reduced to a vassal state by the power, within which struggles are led through themes, contributions, not only for influence, but more for a control, assorted with strategic intentions as hidden as possible, of efficient communication flows » (HABERMAS, 1992, p. 173).

Rooms⁷ to bring up those select committees where election campaigns are planned and run. If War Rooms are necessary, it really means that there is a battlefield somewhere!

Even the social groups that most value ideological debate (popular and community movements, human rights champions, environmentalists, left parties, trade-unionists, etc.) admit that public opinion does not only live on the rational, and, helped by specialists, for a long time discuss the best communication strategies, in order to put forward their ideas. “Generalized public relations”, as Bernard Miège (1997) suggests? This expression is certainly interesting since it underlines the universalized recourse to techniques perfected by public relations specialists; however, it conveys a too much negative connotation in order to qualify the recognition of the total communicational phenomenon and the democratic process complexity. As far as I am concerned, I prefer the “omnipresence of communicational strategies” one.

What can the critical analysis position be in the presence of this communication strategies invasion? The answer can only be found in the everlasting work of both processes and ideas dismantling and in the renewal of critical analysis expression forms. In short, in a combination of criticism and communicational, literary and artistic creation, with the acceptance and appropriation of democratic debate multidimensional reality. Avant-gardist artists, journalists and innovative intellectuals have already shown the way. Their contributions have unfortunately known too little acknowledgement and their influence is still limited to restricted initiates circles.

3.3 Public and private reconfiguration

A public sphere existence can only be imagined as opposed to a private sphere. The limits of the one define the other’s. But how can one draw the line? According to which criteria can the boundary be based?

Despite their reality and importance, let’s put aside the private and public conception variations according to civilizations and society types that are distinguished by anthropological and sociological analysis. Since the bourgeois revolution⁸, in Western societies, one is led to think that the private sphere is the domestic life one, or the enterprises and individual economic activity ones. As for the public sphere, it would be the field of collective interest matters. But these general definitions are difficult to concretely implement. Where does general interest end? Which activity does not have any impact on that of others?

⁷ An expression difficult to translate into French, which in the American press, commonly refers to election strategy committee of someone who runs for the United-States presidency.

⁸ The very private notion had no meaning before, as we are taught by historians’ works, like Arlette Farge’s.

The private/public dialectics is essentially dealt with in terms of control and concern both practices and property. Who has got the right and power to know and make known, or keep for himself some activity type or other? Who has got the right and power to take over some goods type or other? It seems to me that the question may be considered from an ideological, juridical or sociological point of view. Let's start with practices, since they are usually the ones to which the distinction between public and private space and between public and private life send back to.

Private and public conceptions obviously change according to philosophical schools and ideological belonging. Nicholas Garnham, for instance, criticises Hegelian and habermassian positions because they are based on a disputable implicit distinction between public and private, and reminds that, in a way, everything may be considered as public⁹.

As the anti-establishment asserted in the late 60's and early 70's, everything has a political dimension. Even if all private behaviours can have collective consequences, it is, yet, generally agreed that there is a margin between what comes under privacy, interpersonal relations, household matters, that are not to be made public, and the more anonymous political and regulation issues that have to be given attention by everyone and publicly discussed. We will, however, see a little further that the distinction between intimate secret and broadcast public is not that clearcut.

Contrary to the spectrum, the neoliberal ideology, triumphant since the 80's, claims that nearly everything is private and that public authorities intervention must be as limited as possible. Paradoxically, this ideological bias, favouring economic and social life privatization, often coexist within the same people and within the same political parties, with a conservative vision and even a fundamentalist one, which questions the separation of the Church and the State and requires an increased public authorities' intervention and control about morality issues that bourgeois society rather used to consider as falling within the private.

The liberal democratic societies' right clearly acknowledges the distinction between public and private spheres. The freedom of expression use, for instance, which authorizes anyone to freely broadcast information and opinions, is usually marked out by restrictions aiming at protecting citizens' private life and reputation right. Societies in which information flows are developed,

⁹ "This trepidation was echoed by Nicholas Garnham (University of Westminster) who questioned traditional conceptions of the public sphere and information society as potentially misleading as they serve to re-articulate existing power structures. Drawing on social and political theory he provided an analysis of approaches to understanding the limits and convergence of the public and private. Following a critique of both Habermas and Hegel's conceptions of the public sphere and their implicit Kantian distinctions between the public and private, he outlined Benhabib's integrationist approach, where everything can be seen as public", in Murphy, Paula M. and Blackman, Colin (1999), "Communications Regulation in the Global Information Society", conference organised by EMRG (European Media Regulation Group) and OECD STI Directorate in Warwick, Great-Britain, from June 3rd to 5th, 1999.

computing and digital networks generalization has significantly increased intrusion possibilities in private life and made protection reinforcement necessary. New laws have then been adopted in order to supervise personal information use held by several ministries and government bodies' data banks. But technical evolution constantly provides tools and new tactics allowing the infringement of the private sphere. That's the way it is with cookies and all sorts of spying softwares that continuously and closely watch the Internet users and give information about their behaviour to interested companies and organisations.

The fight against terrorism engaged by the United-States after the September 11th, 2001 bomb attack, and more or less imposed on their allies, has led to the passing of another law series. As a consequence, all of them tightened control and surveillance measures that may infringe individual freedom and privacy protection. The 2001 Patriot Act promulgated in the United-States, and its manifestations in various allied countries extend the recourse to secret and legitimate intrusions into private sphere, among other things, by electronic or telephone interpersonal communications'surveillance, on the account of public safety reasons.

Beyond or below ideological splits and juridical prescription or suspensions, two, at first opposed, tendencies are noticed at the practical and cultural consumption level. On the one hand, for several years, a cultural consumption increasing individualization is taking place (favoured by the walkman, home-cinema, television and mobile phone, but also by larger and more comfortable flats) and, on the other hand, a strong taste for private life performance is noticed, as shown, for instance, by real-TV programmes'success and the Internet websites proliferation, that broadcast pictures of cameras focused on domestic daily life. Privacy is, henceforth, publicly disclosed, with the most concerned ones'consent. As Pierre Chambat, among others, writes "privacy made public on audiovisual media or on digital networks" (CHAMBAT, 1995, p.69) redefines the limits between public and private.

In short, as well from an ideological point of view than a juridical or sociological one, the dividing line between practices that fall within the private and public sphere is vague and moving. In societies where information flows are developed, the uncertainty of both spheres'limits increase in magnitude and their configuration is subject to constant reinterpretations and endless negotiations. On the one hand, if some tendencies like neoliberal ideology spreading and cultural practices personalization, improve the private sphere's expansion and reinforcement, some factors like the electronic networks'development and control strategies, for state or safety reasons, constitute, on the other hand, constant threats to private life protection.

Media definition of what comes under general interest and consequently deserves being broadcast, continuously vary between what the Anglo-Saxons call human interest and public interest. It may be deplored that this definition is more and more inclined to favour the first category. It has particularly

to be noticed that the public interest definition is changing, taking different shapes and meanings. News bulletins and public affairs programmes¹⁰, for instance, today give a great importance to trivial events and to natural disasters. The extension of “public affairs” genre, henceforth, includes fields like consumption, life styles and practical advice.

Let’s recall that this tendency has been going a long time. However, it is becoming more pronounced with channels’ proliferation and digital networks’ expansion. Viewers’ consumption and network users’ practices strengthen this ambivalence between public interest and human interest. Popular favour granted to real-TV programmes and personal websites proliferation represent a powerful revelation. Private life and intimacy make deliberately an exhibition of themselves. As Mark Andrejevic (2002) suggests, must that be considered as a strategy in order to make more familiar cameras presence, systematic observation and the necessary information gathering of what he calls, following Dan Schiller (1999), digital capitalism? Indeed, according to him, the proliferation of programmes like Big brother and its various other forms, would help to make us familiar with media and cameras omnipresence, necessary to set up and develop an “interactive economy” where surveillance plays a key-role in the consumption rationalization process. Besides, in societies where politics is often restricted to public relations, real-TV, far from encouraging public sphere return to politics, limits itself to proposing an “egalitarian” access to fame, as a kind of individual self-promotion.

The world net woven by the Internet makes the definition of public and private limits, both at the national and international level, more complex. One spontaneously thinks of new possibilities offered by the outstanding network, in order to avoid state control attempts. It allows to elude censorship, to make a dictatorship’s abuses known abroad and to inform its own fellow citizens from servers located in another country. These initiatives¹¹ that represent an important opening up towards democracy are heartily approved.

On the other hand, cross-border information publishing that infringes juridical decisions aiming at protecting, for instance, the under 18 victims’ identity are more problematic. These more and more frequent invasions into privacy, in violation of the law, do not at all serve public interest and have no other aim than satisfying a voyeurist consumerism.

In fact, the disclosure notion hides an ambiguousness because it both means what can be broadcast and what is of general interest. The Enlightenment philosophers thought that what was of general interest did not have to be kept secret, but known by everyone. Today, we are inclined to think that everything that can be broadcast or consumed by any audience belongs to the public. Not long ago,

¹⁰ Programme category, currently in use in North America, includes topical thorough analysis.

¹¹ Chiapas examples of Hong-Kong and Malaysia.

what was of public interest had to be broadcast. Today, everything that can be broadcast is considered as falling within the public. The result is necessarily a public sphere extension, but also a dilution of its content.

In the so-called information societies, the boundaries between public and private are subject to infringements and nearly daily negotiations. A strong tendency is to confuse human interest and general interest with the implicit establishment of an equivalence between the two. Media strategy is an unveiling one that aims at more feeding curiosity and satisfying viewers' consuming appetite, than stimulating public debate.

It should be careful not to conclude that everything is made public in our so-called information societies and that nothing secret is left. Wondering about the ever-changing boundaries between private and public, is also asking a question about what is kept hidden regarding what is revealed. Digital technology, while allowing the opening of new communication and expression opportunities to simple citizens and to various lay groups, offers both private and public potentates a whole package of powerful control, surveillance and private life intrusion means in their own personal benefit.

Those who dispose of huge financial means, order polls, the results of which remain confidential, hire the best experts in order to set up their communication strategies behind doors, and treat themselves to costly advertising and propaganda campaigns without ever publicly accounting for them. These secret manoeuvres are often illegal, as it can be seen from the numerous scandals that sometimes come to the surface in most government systems, yet boasting about democracy.

The private/public dialectics, as I wrote before, is a practice but also a property matter. This issue aspect is often concealed in papers relating to public space evolution. A lot of essays are written about public space splitting up or uniqueness, about debates' decline or the Internet offered opportunities, but no one cares about public service marginalization consequences and the increasing concentration of communication means property.

For more than two decades, as far as broadcasting is concerned, public space is questioned, depreciated, impoverished, privatized or submitted to constant pressures, aiming at reducing it to the smallest share of not very popular and profitable programmes. As a result, public service and political control are willingly mixed up discrediting public network contribution to democratic life. At the same time, economic and technological necessities are put forward to justify capital's convergence and increasing concentration in the hands of a small number of multimedia groups. Yet, it is agreed that democratic vitality largely depend on ideas and opinions pluralism which implies information sources diversity.

However, sources multiplicity does not necessarily convey an opinion plurality. If the monopolistic control is clearly incompatible with democracy, the impact of oligopolistic concentration on information pluralism does not seem that linear. The research results on this issue are not conclusive. Often even contradictory, they allow to suppose the existence of mediation factors between property and pluralism. It is the hypothesis we have reached after a studies inventory on this subject, a hypothesis that will lead the wide research we intend to undertake next year¹².

The concrete exploration of this question seems basic to us, as much for the theoretical research than the setting up of policies regulating this phenomenon. In several contexts, it seems that the survival of an important variety of autonomous media companies is no longer possible and that an alternative is the following: either the disappearance of some of them, or their integration into financially stronger groups. If capital concentration is not really necessarily accompanied by a pluralism reduction, it is absolutely essential to find out under what conditions it is implemented, in order to direct appropriate regulation framework adoption.

CONCLUSION

Taking further issues related to private and public property in the field of communication would require to discuss the public service concept and the private/public partnership tendency, I couldn't study here. Being convinced that this discussion, as the one about the public opinion concept, is essential to the understanding of public space nature and functioning in our contemporary societies, I intend coming back to it soon and, in this prospect, reexamining the works I have already carried out on this matter a few years ago.

I would also have liked to deal with the so-called electronic democracy. It is again an important issue I have lightly touched on, but it should be subjected to a systematic and specific study. I don't believe in a typically electronic democracy existence, and not more in a digital solidarity, according to the emphatic expression used in the World Summit documents on information society. These are empty formulas, that mean nothing¹³ and that only aim at impressing people and throwing them into confusion. Solidarity is human and social, and the different shapes it takes do not strictly depend on technique, even if digital. Democracy is a political system based on a law system. The technical means

¹² The team gathers Eric George, Daniel Paré and Gaëtan Tremblay, in collaboration with the French researchers: Yolande Combès and Philippe Bouquillion, as well as the Spanish researcher Juan Carlos Miguel de Bustos.

¹³ The word digital (numérique in French) is a fashionable one, as was the word virtual, just a few years ago. This adjective, more and more used as a substantive, sends back to numbers, and more precisely to the binary system. Then, what do expressions like "digital democracy", "digital solidarity" and "digital" inclusion mean? A binary democracy, a binary solidarity, a binary inclusion? As we can see, that does not mean anything. If these expressions are used in reference to the Internet network existence and use, it would be more relevant to call it "reticular". The marked preference for the word digital is not innocent. It shows the technological determinism hegemony and vividness in most discourses about information society.

at its disposal can facilitate some operations implied in production, circulation, stocking and information access, but they would not change its functioning principles or determine its nature. The differences between democratic systems that followed one another through history or that coexist today, are not only explained in reference to used communication media.

On the other hand, I think that it is quite relevant to ask oneself what networks expansion, like the Internet, represent in terms of public space evolution, structuration and *modus operandi*. At first sight, it is easy to notice that:

- Chat rooms' increasing number offers expression opportunities to numerous individuals and groups on various subjects;
- It allows and facilitates the creation of semi-public places, by a concentric wave broadcasting of various magnitudes in numerous steps, that make the boundary between public and private more permeable;
- However, mass media relay is still necessary to ensure an important impact on public opinion;
- The Internet happens to be an efficient organisation instrument for the mobilization of militants and social movements, like traditional political parties;
- It is obviously a more and more important varied information source, but of fluctuating value and which cannot always be checked.

However, it is still too early to exactly estimate the lasting consequences of the Internet use on public space structuration and functioning. For the time being, it has to be admitted that we are still very far from the speedy and deep revolution announced by all sorts of futurologists. As it was often the case in history, technique's tremendous potential, as Berthold Brecht qualified it when talking about radio, does not necessarily meet the hoped for results.

Instead of lapsing into prophetic lyricism, it will certainly be well-advised to carefully attend the development of concrete use experiences, as regards production and information circulation, of new debate spaces creation and invention of organisation and mobilization modes. It will neither be the first time in history that real uses will turn out to be fairly different from those at first imagined.

What attitude, inspired by political economy, the intellectual or researcher can and has to adopt? It is, undoubtedly, a question that, fortunately, does not require a univocal answer. As far as I am concerned, I think that enthusiasm and curiosity have to be tempered by a good deal of vigilance and critical eye.