

Civil Society Media Theory: Tools for Decolonizing the Lifeworld

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Abstract: The global discussion on media democracy and communication rights verges on a consensus: there can be no democracy without a third media sector, consisting of media organizations that are non-commercial and non-state and are by, directed at and for the benefit of citizens. This emerging media democracy agenda requires nothing less than the systematic remapping of the media landscape, long conceived two-dimensionally along the axes of 'public' and 'private' media. Rather than dismissing the old model altogether, this paper will argue that it is politically prudent and conceptually feasible to add to it a third dimension/sector/sphere, *civil society media*. What has so far been studied with a variety of approaches under names such as alternative, community, radical, citizens', autonomous, minority, public access, independent, tactical, grassroots, NGO, activist, and migrant media can then be gathered into a field of research that can be tentatively called civil society media. The emergence of a global civil society arena (e.g., at the U.N. World Summit on the Information Society) highlights the urgent need for such a unifying theoretical framework. Civil society media can thus be conceptualized in a way that clarifies their role within a bigger agenda of media democratization. This in turn is part of the agenda of movements to 'decolonize the lifeworld' from government and market forces, and a renewed democratic agenda. Building on existing research and the ongoing dialogue in global civil society arenas, this paper details the goals and challenges of a theory for civil society media as well as the premises on which it can be based.

Keywords: Media theory, theories of civil society, global media policy, alternative media, community media, World Summit on the Information Society, media democracy, communication rights

. Context

A Convergence of Movements to Decolonize the Lifeworld

Habermas observed in 1984 that the 'the lifeworld' (civic space and everyday life) was being colonized by the 'systemworld' (government and market forces). After a short breath of democratic air after the end of the cold war, economic forces began to dominate everyday life and the 'civic sphere' on an unprecedented scale. Economic liberalism swept the world almost unopposed. Around the middle of the 1990s however, the initial shock began to wane and the mood changed. The so-called anti-globalization movement got wings, campaigns were launched to cancel third world debt, a renewed sense of democracy emerged, spawned by growing

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resistance to war. A revival is under way, re-energizing civic debate, both face-to-face and mediated, and creating new avenues of communication and political participation. Corporate-critical movements, feminisms, ecology movements, localisms, social justice and north-south issues, poverty and development, long-fermenting resistance to IMF and WTO, and media activist movements have identified a common nemesis: economic liberalism. This common rallying point has made it possible to speak of it as a ‘movement of movements.’ Highly visible examples include protests against the IMF, G8, WTO and Free Trade Agreements, the World Social Forums and the formation of new policy shaping groups and forums (such as Civil Society at and around the UN organized World Summit on the Information Society). A growing number of people in all corners of the globe are involved in less visible allied work. The goal of this new wave of global social movements is to ‘decolonize’ the lifeworld from market forces.¹ A more formal expression of these developments is ‘global civil society’ (a highly contested but arguably still useful term)² and its participation in global policy making processes such as the World Summit on the Information Society.

Targeting Media: Ripe for Change- Media Democracy and Communication Rights Movements

Among the members of these movements, a consensus has been forming: while the political and economic systems are primary determinants in the body politic, the media system is a key factor of both. In her address to the World Social Forum 2003 (one of the visible convergence points of the ‘movement of movements’), Susanna George said that one of the “challenges we face as we consider mainstream media in the context of globalization” was “mounting a broad-based resistance against the effects of globalizing economic liberalism” (2004:86). In order to change societies and the relationships between them, it is necessary (though not sufficient) to “change the media.”³ This is not solely an issue of media content.⁴ It is an issue of changing the media system as a whole, as well as the organizations within it. Media reform, media democratization and communication rights movements are evolving on the grassroots level, in regional and transnational NGO networks and in international policy arenas. Visions are emerging for the (re-) democratization of media systems at all geo-political levels (translocal to municipal), and they invariably include as one point of their agenda “to foster and promote independent, alternative media initiatives” (Raboy, 2003:101). These are the focal point of this paper.

Civil Society Media at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

The World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was the first UN summit to officially invite civil society to participate in the formal drafting process and as fully recognized members in the summit itself.⁵ The preparations began in 2002 and the first phase of the summit ended in December 2003. The process so far has highlighted the strengths and weaknesses of the existing approaches. Clemencia Rodriguez (a media researcher committed to what she calls citizen’s media and an initiator of the OURmedia network of researchers and activists) reflected on her experience of citizen’s media lobbying and networking throughout the first phase, “there are so

many different groups, NGOs, and individuals working with overlapping agendas but isolated from each other.”⁶ Other participants observed:

- A hard-to-bridge gap between those who identified as alternative/autonomous media outside (at the WSIS?WeSeize! counter-event) and community media inside the main summit (Community Media Working Group and the Community Media Forum)
- The lack of a lobby and therefore support for a broad range of media produced by members of civil society (only community media, specifically community broadcasting, were mentioned in the civil society declaration).
- The marginalization of community media (the only representative of civil society-based media organizations) within the media caucus.⁷

On the positive side, consensus emerged at least within the civil society space (and among some government delegations) that democracy requires a third media sector, consisting of media that are “non-commercial and non-state.”⁸ One challenge lies in finding a connecting framework and unifying terminology for a wide array of discourses and practices (i.e. alternative, community, radical, citizens’, autonomous, minority, public access, independent, tactical, grassroots, NGO, activist, migrant media.) I will attempt to do this by developing the term *civil society media*.

The Need for a Framework

The challenges that a theoretical framework must rise to are:

- It should serve to connect a great variety of practices and discourses without homogenizing (i.e. provide at least a suitable umbrella term, key concepts and a theoretical grounding)
- It should overcome the “state-market” Morton’s Fork¹⁶ by re-inserting civil society (“people”) into the media system.
- Place civil society media (that is, media by and for citizens/people, with civic content) as one pillar of the media democratization project, which in turn is part of a bigger project to ‘decolonize the lifeworld’ from domination by market and state forces.

For this it is necessary to not only take civil society media seriously as objects of research, but to do so from the standpoint of the researcher-as-citizen. What we are aiming for is a theory for (not of) civil society media. The point is not to gain conceptual control of these media practices (which would be the aim of an ‘objective’ theoretical paradigm), but to empower them with tools for action in policy arenas. While this seems a task of absurd proportions, we nonetheless have to tackle it. In the following, I will attempt to develop one basic aspect of it, a model for re-mapping the media landscape. But before we proceed, we need at least a preliminary definition of civil society media.

. Redrawing the Map of Media in Society (Inserting Civil Society Media)

Preliminary Definition of Civil Society Media (via Ownership)

The term “civil society media” was first used by Hintz, in the sense of “non-commercial and non-governmental media,” but this definition needs clarification and elaboration.⁹ First, what do we mean by ‘media’? ‘The media’ (in casual discourse as well as in political, research and activist contexts), often refers to the politically dominant commercial (and/or governmental) media

organizations, and within those even more narrowly to journalism. On the other hand, the term 'media' (without definite article) is used variously (depending on the research tradition) to refer to texts, institutions, technologies and/or meanings created by audience communities. In the following, 'models of media' refers to the web of media organizations, which form a more or less coherent system, relevant to a country, a group or a community (of interest, geographic proximity, of interpretation, etc.).¹¹

As a starting point of my definition, I will use the term "media," in the sense of "a media organization" or "a group of media organizations." My preliminary definition of "civil society media" is "media organizations owned/controlled by members of civil society." This is a matter of analytical convenience, as well as pragmatically useful for engaging in media policy arenas. We will see, however, that to apply the model and locate organizations on this map, we need a holistic definition that includes all aspects and sub-aspects of media as organizations, texts, technologies and audiences.¹² This expanded multi-aspect definition of civil society media, which will be developed at the next stage of this research, is "media for and by members of civil society, with 'civic' content" - civil society media (that is media of civil society) in every sense.¹³ For the following, rather abstract stage of conceptualizing media systems, however, the ownership/control definition will suffice.

A Cautiously Optimistic Civil Society Theory

Why 'Optimistic'?

The concept of 'civil society participation' is already used at the UN (for the first time officially realized in the WSIS process) and increasingly in other media policy arenas. If we agree with the CRIS campaign, MediACT and others that we need to intervene in media governance in order to further the project of democratizing the media, we should attempt to put the concept of 'civil society' to good use. Applied to media, the concept of 'civil society' can help overcome the Morton's Fork of government vs. market control. Furthermore, it can help clarify what kind of democracy we are aiming for: not purely representational democracy, and not 'free market democracy' (probably an oxymoron), but a form of radical democracy: pluralistic, governed by deliberation, inclusive of minority viewpoints.¹⁵

Why 'Cautious'?

Attempts to remap the media landscape have been made, for example by Curran, Jakubowicz, and Jo. Their common feature is the use of concepts of public sphere/s. In my assessment, however, "the public sphere" concept is not well suited to bring us beyond the Morton's Fork of 'governmental vs. commercial media.'¹⁷ Some of its problems can be overcome with what Shinohara calls 'new theories of civil society,' which conceptualize 'civil society' as non-market and non-state. One of the bases of these 'new civil society theories' is in Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*, in which he revised his models in response to feminist and new social movement critiques of his concept of 'public.' However, we should be cautious with Habermas-inspired civil society theories: there are still lurking issues such as class and gender bias, excessive rationalism, public-private dichotomies, and a narrowly European perspective.¹⁸ Most

problematic for our purpose, they tend to lack a media studies perspective. Further, we should keep in mind that the Hegelian-Marxist tradition has traditionally taken a pessimistic view of 'civil society'.¹⁹ Gramsci conceptualizes civil society as a place of struggle over hegemony. For him civil society is a terrain where we can, at best, participate in negotiating power. It is not a social sphere that is intrinsically good. With these cautions in mind, we can take a look at this framework and attempt to adapt it.

The Paradigm Shift in Civil Society Theories: From 2 to 3 Spheres

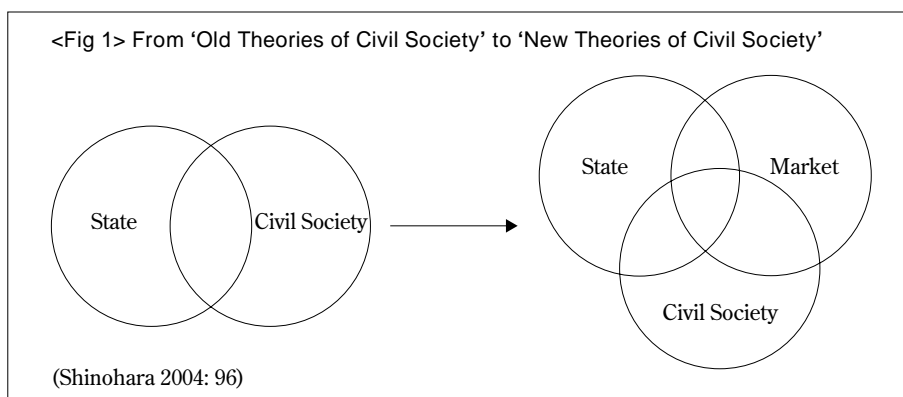
Shinohara Context

One of the difficulties with the term 'civil society' is that it is currently the academic word of fashion, and usage and definitions diverge wildly. The following is needed to bring some order into this jungle. Hajime Shinohara, professor emeritus of Japan's most prestigious university, Tokyo University, has published extensively on the European history of politics. Within the rather conservative and economically oriented political science establishment, he has been a vocal supporter of "citizen's participation" in politics and a critic of market-based views of politics and society. In his most recent publication, *Shimin no Seijigaku (Citizen's Political Science- What is Deliberative Democracy?)*, he outlines in an accessible way the basic concepts for a renewal of democracy. Following mostly German and American theorists (Beck, Habermas, Cohen), he presents his version of deliberative democracy. While he hardly mentions media (quite typical of theories of deliberative democracy), his argument could (with some effort) be made relevant to the media democratization project. Most useful for us and our concern with the issues at the WSIS is his clear-cut review and categorization of theories of civil society. I want to focus here on the shift from 'old' two-sector to 'new' three-sector concepts of civil society.²⁰ According to Shinohara, these 'new' theories emerged in the early 1990ies in the context of economic globalization, new social movements, and other symptoms of what Beck calls Europe's "second modernity." However, they describe developments that began in Europe over 100 years before, in the mid-19th century. In the following, I summarize the main points of the first two sections of Chapter 3.²¹

"Old Theories of Civil Society"

Here Shinohara reviews some key traditions of the first 200 years of theories of civil society, during the European "first modernity" (Beck's term). In his analysis, they were formulated under the influence of the ideas of mercantilism and the reverberations of the French revolution. They share a binary view of two overlapping²² social spheres: state and civil society. The transition out of this model begins with Gramsci.

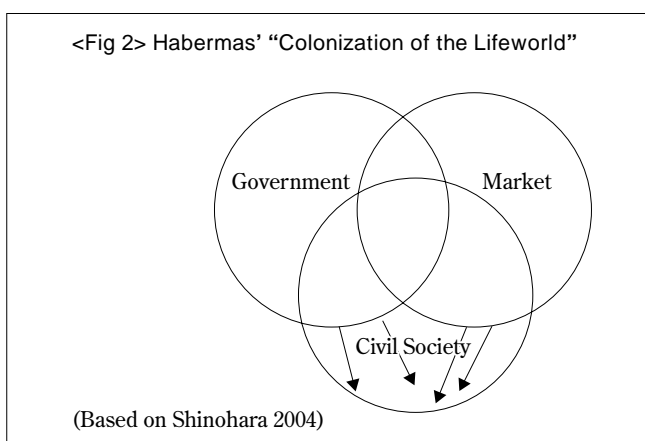
Different from other Marxists (who have a wholly negative view of civil society as a place of [economic] control), he views civil society as mediating between state and economic sphere. His definition of civil society includes (but is not limited to) the family, the school system, the church, and the mass media (this is an issue which I will discuss in detail below). For him, civil society is a place of hegemonic control in addition - not opposition - to the state. However, because the power structures within it are complex, civil society hegemony does not have 'one thrust' like



state power. The leaders must obtain some social “consensus.” Shinohara specifies: “In this sense, for Gramsci civil society has the potential to become the base of resistance, but it can also become a tool for control.” (2004:97) From this theory of hegemony, a new concept of civil society emerges, one of three spheres.

“New Theories of Civil Society”

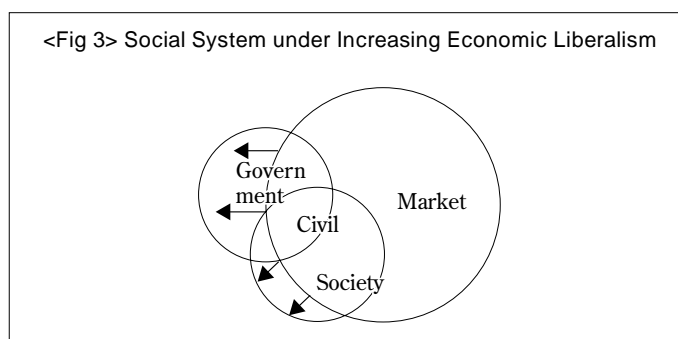
In the early 1990s, Habermas, Cohen and other theorists of civil society rediscover Gramsci. They develop new concepts of civil society, which, divergent as they are, share a conception of three overlapping and interdependent spheres: state, market and civil society, and that “among them, civil society should be dominant.” (2004:98). (In other words, these models are normative.) This is illustrated in fig. 1 (translation mine). From here I do not follow Shinohara’s section titles anymore, but continue to summarize his points.²³



Colonization of the Lifeworld

In the course of the 19th century, corporations rise to power within civil society. This leads to the economic system breaking off from ‘civil society’ and becoming an independent sector. Entering the 20th century, the economic system begins to work hand in hand with the state to oppress people, and the development of mass media adds to this tendency.²⁴ This is what

Habermas calls the “colonization of the lifeworld,” in totalitarian societies primarily by the state (2004:98). He refers to the Nazi state, also the insidious ‘Stasi’ (“state security”) surveillance system in East Germany. On the other hand, in corporate capitalist societies, the market takes over every aspect of the lifeworld. Shinohara gives death from overwork as an illustrative example of how all areas of life, “have to function under the dictate of profit and efficiency” (98).²⁵ I suggest a simple visual representation of the concept of ‘colonization of the lifeworld’ in fig. 2. Adjusting the sizes of the spheres according to actual power relationships, one gets models of a world under economic liberalism with the market sphere large, and government and civil society relatively small (fig.3).



The Distinct Universes of Media and Civil Society Theories

While the three-sphere model of society that Shinohara describes is widely used in the social and political sciences, media studies lags behind. This is not the fault of media studies alone.

The Media-free Desert of Civil Society Theories

There are a number of difficulties in applying theories of civil society (and related theories of radical democracy) to the media system. One is the lack of a media perspective in theories of civil society.

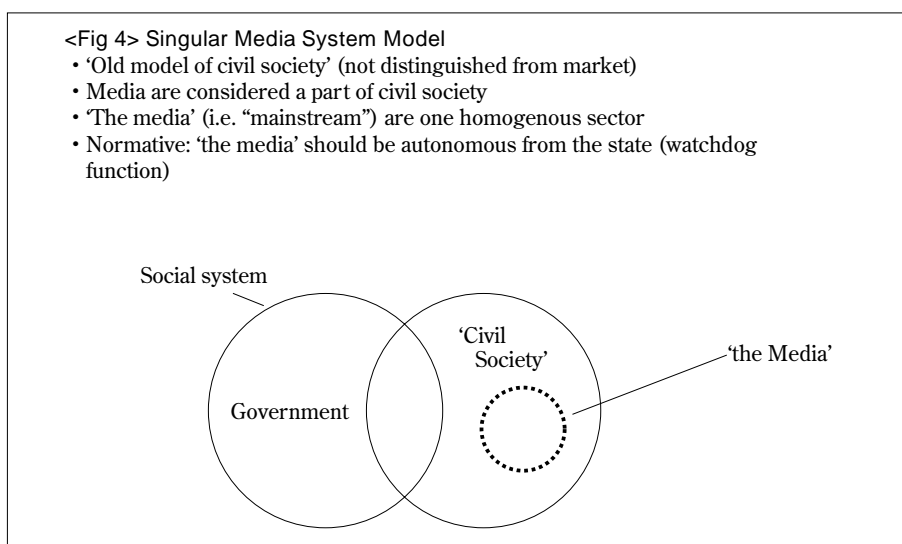
Downing, in his introduction to *Radical Media*, reviews “models of democracy” for potentially “intersecting” them with radical media. He looks specifically at Held, Barber and Tourraine and finds that “the unfortunate aspect of the political science literature’s lacuna in the area of media and communication is that it is often those most committed to democracy who wander forever in a media free desert”(42). He continues, “It is absurd. It is as if the democratic process were conceived, [...] as being composed of astute but entirely mute chessboard pieces [...].” He charges, “the majority of political analysts’ models of democracy, because they are without communication, they are without humans, too”(42).

While he admits that Habermas, Dewey and Lipman “state some very attractive positions concerning communication and democracy, they do not address the messy world of actuality.” (42). Downing does not review theories of deliberative democracy,²⁶ but it is quite clear that they are no exception. Shinohara also “wanders in a media-free desert.” Downing, in spite of his scathing critique of theories of democracy, proceeds to assert, “radical alternative media are the

chief standard bearers of a democratic communication structure” (43). This ‘democracy argument for non-commercial, non-governmental media’ is perhaps the most widely used in literature and advocacy. However, without grounding in civil society theory, it cannot be qualified at all. Theories of civil society that have been adapted to study the full range of the diverse media landscape are essential.

The Missing Paradigm Shift in Media Theory

As a result of the continued mutual ignorance of new civil society theories and media theories, we have to live with the following types of models of media systems for ‘western-style’ societies (representative democracy combined with some form of market economy).

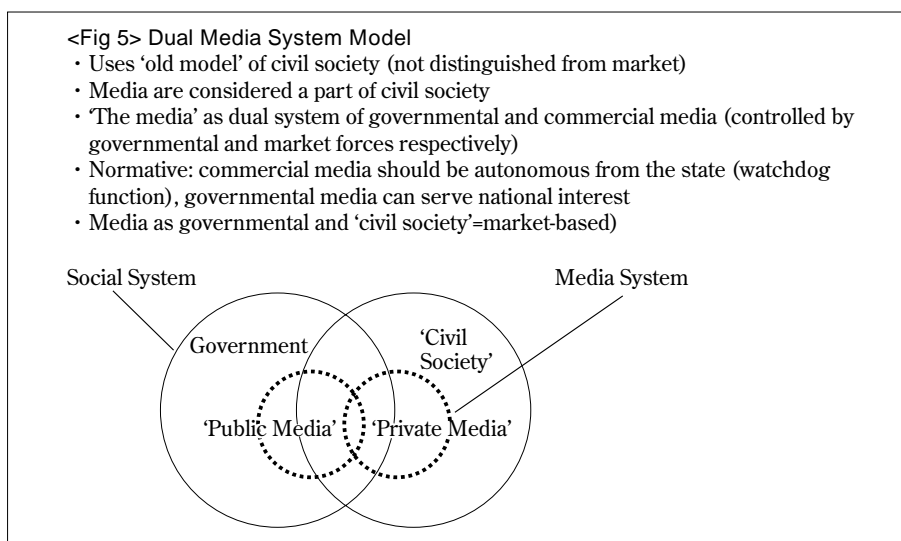


Singular Model of Media Systems (fig. 4)

In this type of model, the media system is seen as one homogenous unit, ideally independent from the state. Terms such as ‘the media’ and ‘the press’ are characteristic of this view, and its discourse emphasizes news media as dominant features of the media landscape. In political science terms, this view is expressed in the notion that ‘the media’ are ‘civil society institutions.’ ‘Ideally, the media’ (as institutions and texts) are wholly within the ‘civil society’ sphere (which includes market forces) as illustrated in fig. 4.

It is the dominant model in the journalism tradition of media and communication studies, where it is used to stress that ‘the media’ are (or should be) the ‘watchdog’ of government. ‘The media’ are assumed to represent (at least in principle) ‘the public’ and to reflect ‘public opinion.’ Discourses of ‘press freedom’, ‘balanced reporting’ etc. are part and parcel of this. The implicit model of society here is the ‘old model’- state and ‘civil society’, with the market not differentiated from civil society. This view allows the colonization of the lifeworld by economics to happen right under our noses, completely unnoticed. In terms of media ownership, this model privileges one form, and that is ‘non-state.’ In practice this means ‘privately owned.’ Because it conflates ‘the

interest of people' with 'commercial interest,' it has difficulty accounting for the much-criticized phenomenon of commercialization. It is even less helpful when government and commercial forces (the 'systemworld') combine to oppress and control people. Recently revived concepts like 'corporate censorship' and 'public interest journalism' represent challenges to this model and point the way to its revision.



Dual model of media systems (fig.5)

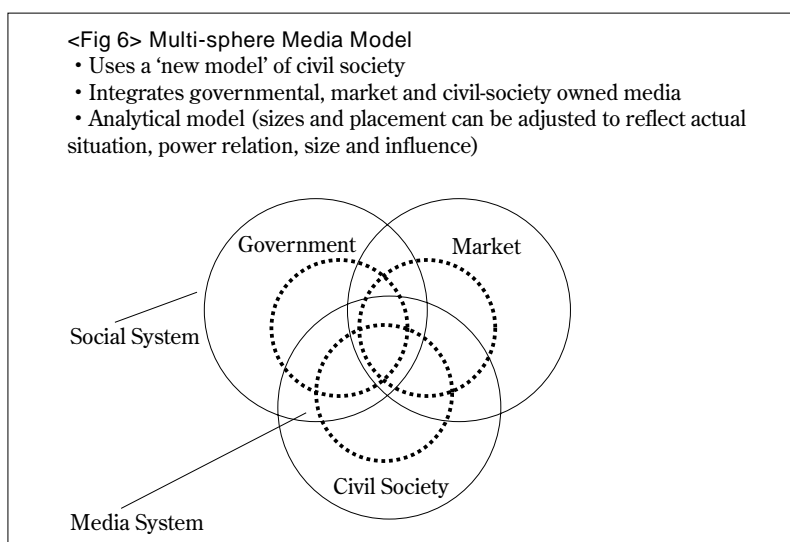
Many countries' broadcasting licensing systems reflect the view that there are two types of media, 'public' (often synonymous with governmental) and 'private' (in practice synonymous with 'commercial').²⁷ This means, the broadcast media system officially has two sectors, a public and private sector as seen in fig. 5. In practice, this puts big obstacles in the way of civil society broadcasters in terms of licensing and funding. Emblematic is the story of the end of the broadcast monopoly in Austria, a kind of tragic comedy (or comic tragedy?). In 1993, "free radios" (together with aspiring commercial broadcasters) complained at the European Court of Human Rights against the broadcasting monopoly of the Austrian public broadcaster. They won. However, the revised broadcast law and subsequent revisions established a dual broadcast system. "Free radios" are now eligible to apply for a broadcast license, but with their non-profit and civil status unrecognized, they must meet the same strict financial and other requirements as commercial broadcasters. This puts them under pressure from market forces AND government. The irony is that this 'liberalization' is supposed to have brought Austrians the right to voice opinions (through TV and radio mediums) in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights, Article 10.²⁸ The demand for a tri-partite broadcast system has remained on top of the agenda of Austria's Association of Free Radios.²⁹

The above are the "dominant models of media" that Ó Siochrú encourages us to overcome in order to build "a transnational movement for media democratization"(335). Stuck in 'old

models of civil society,' in which 'civil society' has been largely colonized by market forces, they frame out members of civil society (in the 'new sense', including citizens, voluntary associations, social movements and NGOs) as owners of media organizations,³⁰ and do not require much of commercial media in terms of civiness of audiences or content. It is much to the credit of civil society media practitioners and advocates that they have still managed to insert civil society (organizations, texts, audiences, policies) into so many media systems, establishing legal recognition for civil society media or simply making them a reality within the existing systems (or outside them).

From Dual to Multi-sphere Media Models

Remapping the Media Landscape



Successful political and practical interventions by community media, radical media and public access TV activists have created spaces for non-commercial/non-governmental media.³¹ However, they had to do this with only a scant grounding in academic theories, most of which continue to operate with a dual 'public media-private media' model. The growing number of academics calling for media reform³² or "a renewed public sphere"³³ operate with a multi-sphere model (referring variously and vaguely to a 'third sector', a 'civic sector', 'alternative media', 'community media', 'non-mainstream media'). However, there have only been a few serious attempts to articulate this model in a systematic way³⁴ and put it into the context of a 'new' civil society theory. This is the task most urgently at hand. Combining the new paradigm already in practice with a theoretical background in civil society theory, we can come up with the basic (analytical) model in fig. 6. It helps us to visualize the overdue paradigm shift to new models of civil society with a redefined place and shape of media systems. Using a three sphere model of society, we draw the media system as a microcosm of the whole, three spheres which we preliminarily distinguish from each other by type of ownership- governmental, commercial and civil society.³⁵ We should keep in mind, however, that there are vast areas of mediated

communication that the organization-based map does not cover. Like all maps, other maps are needed to put it in context. Finally, to apply this model, these three overlapping types of media organizations need to be sub-differentiated in a detailed analysis taking into account various aspects of audiences, texts, and production.³⁶ The model may be neat, but “reality is messy” (Downing, 2001).

‘New Civil Society Models’ Applied at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)

Within the context of the United Nations, ‘old two-sphere models of society’ were dominant from 1945 until quite recently.³⁷ UN decisions and negotiations were conducted as inter-governmental affairs, at least officially. However, since the late 80s, the role of transnational corporations and, to a smaller degree, transnational NGOs and NGO networks at the UN increased rapidly. These groups were commonly referred to as ‘non-state actors,’ (a notion that reflects an ‘old civil society model’) and structures evolved to accommodate them.³⁸ A new step in civil society- UN relations was taken in the preparatory process for the World Summit on the Information Society (which began in 2001): the UN³⁹ officially invited so-called “multi-stakeholder participation.” “Civil society” and “the business sector” (along with governments and international organizations) were called on to join the negotiations.⁴⁰ This was perhaps the first example where a ‘new’ model of society was officially applied to a global governance space. ‘New civil society theories’ were put to the test, so to speak, and their weaknesses showed themselves very quickly,⁴¹ among them the fact that they have not appropriately accounted for the complexity of media systems and their place in the multi-sphere social system. This had direct effects on who could participate, where and in what capacity. Civil society accreditation/access and (self-) organization were loosely based on definitions of civil society theories. The “civil society bureau,” a civil society self-organizing structure (i.e. not imposed from above) summed up in its original mission statement as follows.

Definition of Civil Society⁴²

The definition starts with a quote from the UN Inspection Unit “This notion [“civil society”] covers the entities of the third sector (distinct from the State and from the private sector) that are engaged in non-profit activities.” In addition to endorsing this, it states: “Civil Society itself is comprised of all entities that are nor the State, intergovernmental organizations and the private sector.” The accompanying footnote specifies, “the private sector includes firms and private sector associations.”

Families within the Civil Society Bureau, Caucuses and Working Groups of Civil Society

Under its administrative realm, (and therefore implicitly in its definition of civil society) the civil society bureau includes as ‘families’: social movements (ad hoc movements without legal status), NGOs (legal entities), creators and promoters of culture, parliamentarians, the Media [sic], multi-stakeholder partnerships, cities and local authorities, academia and education, youth, gender, trade unions, etc.⁴³ While there are several questionable inclusions here, one that proved

especially problematic was the wholesale inclusion of ‘the Media’ (with capital M no less). The civil society bureau described the media family as containing “broadcasters, regulators, press, journalist associations, NGO media, freedom of expression associations, etc.”⁴⁴ As many broadcasters and regulators are businesses or governmental institutions, it is clear that this is in direct contradiction to the bureau’s own definition of civil society.

The Media Caucus

While the families were administrative units, the actual work was done in civil society caucuses and working groups. The caucuses prepared input into language (of the main declaration and civil society statements), strategies for lobbying governments, speakers for speaking slots, etc. The multi-stakeholder caucuses (‘gender’ and ‘youth’) included some government and commercial entities, though overall they represented broadly ‘civic’ concerns, not primarily their commercial or political interest. The Media Caucus was not labeled a ‘multi-stakeholder’ caucus, and officially considered to represent ‘civil society’ interests in the same way as caucuses such as human rights, indigenous peoples, and NGO gender strategies. In reality, however, commercial and professional interests dominated the Media Caucus. They used it to push their pet issues (such as media freedom, anti-censorship and anti-regulation, the special protection of journalists, etc.) within a formal civil society space. Some of those issues are inconsistent with democratic media policy and governance, which is to say against the interests of large parts of civil society.⁴⁵ A typical scene: The Media Caucus meets to discuss civil society input into the main declaration draft.⁴⁷ The Private Broadcasters Working Group brings in a proposal for language: “legal non-commercial community media [...should be limited to] low-limited power of transmission and will not be allowed to form broadcast networks.”⁴⁸ Community media members and other civically-minded caucus members spend the bigger part of the session opposing it.⁴⁹ They succeed, but another opportunity is wasted to get media democratization language into the draft declaration, including support for community media.⁴⁶ It may seem that this was just another one of the many absurdities particular to the WSIS Geneva Phase. I would argue otherwise. The Media Caucus appeared as a microcosm of the real media world: commercial entities use civil society’s airwaves (in this case, the input channels reserved for civil society voices), commercial speech gets most of the airtime (with public broadcasters and civically minded media professionals putting in a word of moderation here or there) and civil society media people pull off amazing projects under adverse conditions (underfunding, legal attacks, ridicule, etc.). The situation, be it in the WSIS Media Caucus, Austria’s airwaves, or academia, is absurd: civil society consistently is marginalized in what is supposedly its own domain. It is as if the tenant is not only refusing to pay rent, but also denying the landlord the right to exist.⁵⁰ This is unlikely to change as long as theoretical models persist that refuse to acknowledge that the majority of media organizations is not ‘civic’ (certainly not by, and usually not even for civil society).

Premises for a Democratic Theory of Media and Society

This is the type of analytical model that needs to become the base of thinking about media

and society:

- a. The social system has (at least) three (overlapping) spheres.
- b. The media system is not wholly part of civil society, but owned by stakeholders from all sectors, a microcosm of the larger social system.

Let us add to this a normative aspect:

- c. The media system is owned by all people and therefore should be 'civic'- in terms of contents, audiences and accountability, at least.

This last point should be obvious: All media should be *for citizens*. This means that people are treated as diverse, active audiences and producers of media, not merely 'a mass,' or consumers, taxpayers and media workers. Texts should also be 'for' (in the sense of 'for the benefit of') people. If it is not, what is the justification for making them? In terms of organizations, not all need to be owned or directly controlled by members of civil society. Diversity of media in terms of ownership is needed to providing people with what they need. A small number of committed people, researchers and activists, have pioneered this model, and taken it to the streets and policy arenas. But we will continue to be limited to negotiating for little concessions if we do not reclaim media theory. We need to reform thinking about the place of media in society- as it is and how it should be. Unless we reform media theory, civil society will continue to remain on the defensive in every deliberation and policymaking process. This necessary reform of theory happens on several levels: in re-conceptualizing the system, but also in (re-)positioning of the researcher as citizen.

. Civil Society Media as Part of the Project to Decolonize the Lifeworld

Are Civil Society Owned Media Organizations Democratic?

One of the standard criticisms of civil society media is the issue of legitimacy. Civil society media have no elected mandate. In addition, while they criticize the hierarchy within commercial and governmental organizations, their own internal structures are not necessarily democratic and transparent. In terms of content, participatory communication structures and non-hierarchic organization do not automatically produce 'democratic' texts (in form and content) or texts that are 'good' by any standard. Further, because they often critique 'professionalism' as elitist and ideologically biased, they have difficulty accounting for the reliability and quality of their own contents.⁵¹ What's more, "repressive radical media" (Downing) could easily pose as civil society media and use their channels for un-civic ends (on a media production as well as a media policy level). It helps also to keep in mind Gramsci's notion that civil society is a place where the powerful consolidate their power through hegemonic negotiation. A set of guidelines for evaluating the 'civicness' of a media organization is necessary- this will be the next step. A definite plus of civil society media is, however, is that they are not controlled by (though hardly autonomous from) government and market forces, and thereby can serve at least theoretically as 'decolonized' communication spaces. They thus can add to a plurality of discourses, which is one of the pillars of deliberative democracy. Diversity of sources of information and entertainment and means of expression cannot be supplied solely by governmental or commercially owned media, no matter how well regulated and accountable to citizens. Thus the media diversity

argument (for a media system with a plurality of ownership, contents and audiences) should be stated explicitly in addition to the democracy and communication rights arguments.⁵² A strong civil society media sector is a necessary condition for media democracy and communication rights. However, it is not a sufficient condition. Commercial and governmental media should not be allowed to “outsource” their social responsibility to ‘good NGO media,’ (e.g. to claim that there is no need for better representation of minorities because alternative media will correct the stereotypes), in the same way that governments cut welfare systems and leave NGOs to deal with the consequences. Civil society media should not serve as band-aids to hold the economic neo-liberalist project together.⁵³ This is why it is essential to conceptualize them as part of a bigger media democracy framework, which itself is connected to the bigger project of decolonizing of the lifeworld. Oh Jung-hyun of MediACT once remarked, in an interview on media literacy educators partnering with corporations in order to spread their gospel, “How nearsighted. We want to change the media, but the really important thing is to change the world.” As media activists, we have to keep our eyes on the whole project. Too often already have we sold off the community woods in order to protect a couple of leaves on our civil society tree. I call this phenomenon “the tragedy of the activist commons.”

Co-option, Overuse and Misuse of the Concept

Firstly, it is important to make sure a particular group does not claim or co-opt the term. Civil society media is not only to community media, activist media, media projects by legal NGOs or any other kind of formal civil society media projects. It includes media produced by loose associations of people and individuals as well. Next, as the term becomes fashionable, it may lose its analytic and descriptive value if we do not define it clearly and use it consciously. Academia made the mistake of overusing and under-theorizing the term “globalization” in the late 90s until it had been practically emptied of meaning and analytical value. With some effort, it should be possible to avoid this for ‘civil society media.’ Finally, if (or when) the term may gets co-opted by those seeking to strengthen the existing hegemonic power, a shift in terms and tactics will be required. Still, this framework can provide us with stratagems and a tool for honing our vision for some time to come. At this point, abandoning the concept of civil society would be premature - we would be giving up another opportunity for negotiation and discarding another potential tool for decolonizing the lifeworld.

The Challenges it Can Take On

The task of civil society media theory is not limited to describing or theorizing ‘non-mainstream’ media, and advocating them, though these are also necessary and important tasks. It aims higher- to re-insert civil society into the media system. The challenge is to theorize civil society media as part of a media democratization project, “to recreate the media [system as a whole] [...] in a form that is relatively autonomous from state and market” (Curran). The concept ‘civil society media’ can be used practically (and tactically) in media and communications policy places like the WSIS, to network, and in academia to establish an academic field and a basis for action - without glossing over the differences between the wildly varying types of civil society

media. For this end, we cannot shy away from defining and theorizing the concept of civil society, quixotic as it may be. The alternative would be to let those in positions of power define it for us. As the WSIS media caucus experience shows, we have already let that happen, simply because we have been theoretically ill equipped.⁵⁴ If we want to use tools like the emerging civil society spaces in policy arenas to further the project of decolonizing the lifeworld, we have to be more pro-active, more involved, more visionary researchers.

Towards Visionary Theories

The concept of “civil society media” has the potential to address these issues, but it will involve lots of academic work and practical/political struggle. The academy has wasted too much time. The so-called ‘new civil society theories’ that have been articulated in the late 20th century describe a shift that first occurred with the rise of the corporation, in the European 19th century. It took the political sciences a hundred years to wake up to this. Many in the field of media studies are still asleep. This has significant real- world ramifications. If our models had not conflated ‘people’ and ‘market’⁵⁵ (or, in the Leninist model, ‘people’ and ‘state’),⁵⁶ economic liberalism would not have become so dominant in the first place. We could have more effectively resisted the colonization of the lifeworld through market forces. Instead, we let history repeat itself- in post-soviet Europe, in post-Suharto Indonesia,⁵⁷ post-Tienamen China, etc.: We stand by as people die in the fight against state control, and watch the market reaping the benefits in the end. We must learn from these mistakes we have made, define the tasks and build theoretical tools for the future. It really is the job of the academy as an institution of civil society to supply models for democratic action and visions for the future.⁵⁸ Bruce R. Powers, in his preface to *Global Village* wrote, “[McLuhan thought that] we must have ways of anticipating the future. Humankind [...] must [...] develop a habit of approaching the present at task, as an environment to be discussed, analyzed, coped with, so that the future may be seen more clearly.” I would argue, not just seen, but also shaped.

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Notes

- 1 See Thompson, p.256 for a succinct explanation of this concept. "[According to Habermas Theory of Communicative Action], the task today for a radical programme of democratization should be, [...] to push back the colonizing intrusion of system imperatives into the lifeworld." He also critically assesses the relevance of Habermas concepts of 'public sphere' for media studies.
- 2 Keane makes a strong argument for the usefulness and appropriateness of this term.
- 3 "Know the media. Change the media. Be the media." Media Carta <http://mediacarta.org>, [accessed 11/7/2004]
- 4 That was the North American identity politics and political correctness debate of the early 1990s. The victories of this movement amounted to "rearranging the furniture while the house burned down," as Naomi Klein put it (2000:123).
- 5 See Adams (2002) for the advances in UN-Civil Society (mostly NGO) relationships during the 90s.
- 6 Rodriguez, Clemencia [clemencia@ou.edu] , 'About the Summit' (mass mailing to members of WSIS civil

society), [sent 15 December 2003 20:51]

- 7 I will discuss this point in detail below.
- 8 That this definition is far too weak and vague will be the subject of the next section as well as a future paper on evaluation methods.
- 9 Servaes et al would label the approach taken here a “society centered approach” to defining “community media” [sic]- “Approach III- part of civil society”.
- 11 We have to keep in mind, however, that people of different levels of access and ability will inhabit and tap into very different aspects and levels of those systems.
- 12 Taking the matter one step further would be to take the ‘media-as-culture’ approach, arguably the most integrated and holistic approach. Downing (2001) attempts to create a kind of cultural studies approach for alternative media. Useful as this may be for studying alternative media as ‘social phenomenon,’ it is not well suited for informing policy discourse.
- 13 Contrast this with approaches that study “media and civil society” as essentially separate, if not oppositional.
- 15 Deliberative and radical models of democracy are highly relevant to this approach, but to evaluate them and put them into connection with civil society theories and media studies would go far beyond the scope of this paper.
- 16 “Morton’s Fork is an expression that describes a choice between two equally unpleasant alternatives, or two lines of reasoning that lead to the same unpleasant conclusion.” http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morton%27s_Fork [accessed 12/19/04]
- 17 The limitations of the concept of ‘the public sphere’ will be further discussed at another opportunity.
- 18 A detailed discussion of this issue will be the topic of a separate paper.
- 19 For detailed discussion, see Shinohara (2004:93f). Also see Femina, Joseph, “Civil Society and the Marxist Tradition” in Kavaraj, Sudipta et al. (2001) *Civil Society. History and Possibilities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 20 See beginning of the third chapter, “New theories of civil society”, pp. 91ff
- 21 The original text is in Japanese, translations mine.
- 22 “Even Hegel stresses that they are intricately interrelated” (p.95)
- 23 The following illustrations are mine.
- 24 In this account, there is no mention of early 20th century social movements and their media. Shinohara wanders in “double desert”- free of media, and where there is an occasional media oasis, bare of alternative media- though he does quote some alternative media in his gloss of Japanese ‘new social movements.’
- 25 Here ends my summary of Shinohara and begins my application of it to media studies.
- 26 Even including those that would theoretically be most attractive and useful to Downing, such as those developed in Mouffe’s *Radical Democracy*.
- 27 The political economy approach in media studies is, as the name suggests, also indebted to this model.
- 28 For a general account of this development, see Steinmaurer p. 41. The free radio perspective is presented by Hirner.
- 29 See their charta, section “Forderungen” (demands): “Dreiteilung der vorhandenen Frequenzen auf die drei Standbeine öffentlich-rechtlicher, kommerzieller und gemeinnütziger freier Rundfunkveranstalter (triales Rundfunksystem)” <http://www.freie-radios.at/charta.php>

- 30 Keeping them in the role of 'consumers of media', at best 'active readers' or 'well-informed national citizens'.
- 31 O' Siochru (in MediACT 2004, p. 200) "In general in Ireland, we define community media as the 'third pillar of the media,' a term that was taken up recently by an important government-appointed commission to review media structures." There are a growing number of countries with a tri-partite broadcasting system or at least government recognition that there could or should be. The recognition of community radio in UN documents points to this. See Buckley.
- 32 e.g. McChesney.
- 33 E.g. Curran.
- 34 Notably by Jakubowicz (1989) Curran (1991), Jo (2004).
- 35 In applying the model to specific situations, the size and placement of the spheres would be adjusted according to the locality, technology, audiences, and economic and political situation. For example, in a totalitarian regime, the civic sphere would be very small, the commercial sphere entirely within the government space, etc.
- 36 This will be developed in a future paper.
- 37 This may reflect a pre-modern model of society (that does not yet differentiate between 'old civil society'/'private interests' - and the state).
- 38 Actually, interaction of NGO/NPOs and business sector entities in relation to the UN dates back to the beginning of the UN. See Clarke and Opitz.
- 39 More precisely, the ITU, the UN special organization who organized WSIS.
- 40 Though the final decisions were made inter-governmentally, with insufficient concessions to civil society demands, prompting the civil society entities present to issue its own declaration For detailed account, see Raboy (2004:35ff)
- 41 It began with the accreditation procedure. It turned out that basically nobody was turned away- with one exception. This openness was used by Chinese government delegates throughout the process to attack the legitimacy and credibility of civil society.
- 42 WSIS, Civil Society & NGO open ended bureau proposal 30 January 2003
- 43 Complete list at <http://www.geneva2003.org>
- 44 Civil Society Bureau, *Guidelines for civil society fellowships*, Sept 12 2003, <http://geneva2003.org> [accessed 12/12/2003]
- 45 An example from the Prepcom III Media Caucus Proposal for Text to be included in the WSIS Declaration. [WSIS Thetha] open list. 16 September 2003. <http://lists.sn.apc.org/pipermail/wsis/2003-September/000020.html>: "Security and other considerations [sic. that can include quota systems, human rights of victims of crime, etc.] should not be allowed to compromise freedom of expression and media freedom.'; Also see comments by community working group convener Steve Buckley, "The experience of the 'media caucus', that operated under the civil society umbrella with a motley range of actors, was one of the most complex to manage. In reality it was more of a 'multi-stakeholder' group than a civil society one, [...]. It is thus clear that a much broader civil society platform will be needed to defend media reform issues.' Buckley, Steve, quoted in Raboy (2004), p. 152.
- 46 Fortunately, parts of a broader democratic communication agenda were furthered by the other caucuses and working groups.

- 47 Prepcom 3, Geneva, ITU, on 9/13/2004
- 48 Proposal by Private Broadcasters WG, 9/13/2004
- 49 This tried to use the traditional 'local' focus of community media practitioners and advocates against them. Fortunately, Tracey Naughton, the chair, explained that community is by no means limited to locality. However, this could have easily lead to language input to the main declaration or a statement from 'civil society' that attacks civil society based media.
- 50 Subversive squatting methods, except the squatters are commercial interests and what is being squatted on is most people's right to communicate.
- 51 See Dichter, p. 15 for an example how this plays out in practice.
- 52 Even if it possible to link them within a deliberative democracy framework.
- 53 I am indebted to MJ Kim, director at MediACT for this insight.
- 54 The degree to which transnational NGOs have, in some 'new civil society' discourses, become practically synonymous with 'civil society' is an indication of this process.
- 55 The so-called 'anti-state model of civil society.'
- 56 The so-called 'anti-market model of civil society.'
- 57 For an account of the same factors at work on the internet, see Lim (post-Suharto Indonesia): "As a result of the shift of ownership (of internet centers) from 'the people' to the corporate economy, the Internet is on its way to becoming a sanitized medium." (p 284)
- 58 Perhaps academia, like the media system itself, needs to be democratized.