RESEARCH

DEMOCRACY, PUBLIC SPHERE AND MEDIA

Democracia, esfera pública y medios de comunicación

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ABSTRACT

This work is based on a question: Can you sustain a theory of deliberative democracy like the one posited by Seyla Benhabib and Jürgen Habermas without a normative theory of the media? To answer this question, we have delved into the concept of the public sphere in late-capitalist societies, contrasting the works of both philosophers with the critical contributions of Nancy Fraser, author that we understand complements the most appropriate definition. The public sphere is the traditional space of deliberation and in it we include the media. That is why we argue that, in effect, deliberative democracy must have a normative theory of the media, because they are the role of intermediaries and propagators of deliberation, but their hybrid public-private status obliges us that this theory regulations guarantee their service to the general interest. In this framework we will expose some of the elements that can contribute to the formulation of this normative theory and we will emphasize two of the issues that we believe are fundamental, namely, the establishment of the agenda of topics discussed in the mass media and the frame in which the informative contents are shown.

KEY WORDS: deliberative Democracy – public sphere – media – public opinion – political participation – agenda-setting – issue framing.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo parte de una pregunta: ¿Se puede sostener una teoría de la democracia deliberativa como la que postulan Seyla Benhabib y Jürgen Habermas sin una teoría normativa de los medios de comunicación? Para responder a esta cuestión hemos

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ahondado en el concepto de esfera pública en las sociedades tardocapitalistas contrastando los trabajos de ambos filósofos junto a las aportaciones críticas de Nancy Fraser, autora que entendemos complementa la definición más adecuada. La esfera pública es el espacio tradicional de la deliberación y en ella incluimos a los medios de comunicación. Por eso sostenemos que, efectivamente, la democracia deliberativa debe contar con una teoría normativa de los medios de comunicación, pues a estos les corresponde el rol de intermediarios y propagadores de la deliberación, pero su estatus híbrido público-privado nos obliga a que esta teoría normativa garantice su servicio al interés general. En este marco expondremos algunos de los elementos que pueden contribuir a la formulación de esta teoría normativa y pondremos énfasis en dos de las cuestiones que creemos fundamentales, a saber, el establecimiento de la agenda de temas que se tratan en los medios de comunicación de amplias audiencias y el encuadre en el que se muestran los contenidos informativos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Democracia deliberativa – esfera pública – medios de comunicación – opinión pública – participación política – *agenda-setting* – encuadre informativo.

DEMOCRACIA, ESFERA PÚBLICA E MÍDIA

RESUME

Este trabalho parte de uma pergunta: se pode sustentar uma teoria da democracia deliberativa como a que postulam Seyla Benhabib e Jürgen Habermas sem uma teoria normativa dos meios de comunicação? Para responder a esta questão profundiremos no conceito de esfera pública nas sociedades tardo-capitalistas contrastando os trabalhos de ambos filósofos junto à as apartações críticas de Nancy Fraser, autora que entendemos que complementa a definição mais adequada. A esfera pública e o espaço tradicional da deliberação e nela incluímos a os meios de comunicação. Por isso sustentamos que, efetivamente, a democracia deliberativa deve contar com uma teoria normativa dos meios de comunicação, pois a eles corresponde o papel de intermediários e propagadores da deliberação, mas seu status hibrido público-privado nos obriga a que esta teoria normativa garantisse seu serviço ao interesse geral. Neste âmbito exporemos alguns dos elementos que podem contribuir a formulação desta teoria normativa e poremos ênfases em duas das questões que cremos fundamentais, a saber, o estabelecimento da agenda de temas que se tratam nos meios de comunicação de amplas audiências e o enquadre no qual se mostram os conteúdos informativos.

PALAVRAS CHAVE: Democracia deliberativa – esfera pública – meios de comunicação – opinião pública – participação política – agenda-setting – enquadre informativo.

26

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

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1. INTRODUCTION

The conception of deliberative democracy of Seyla Benhabib, a debtor of that of Jürgen Habermas, presents the double consideration of *norm*, understood as the set of rights and duties, and *utopia*, that is, the anticipation of a community of needs and solidarity (Benhabib, 1996), which allows it to be addressed as a verifying rule of the legitimacy of a form of government (*norm*) and as a civic ethic (*utopia*) that requires the effective participation of individuals in the approval of norms that affect all community.

This effective participation aims to respond to the demand of different political actors in reference to areas in which the principle of autonomy remains under the influence of other sources of legitimacy, such as tradition, power relations or the reason of State.

In the theories of deliberative democracy, this right to decide is manifested in the form of a stance whose rationality is made to depend on the depth and breadth of the judgment that supports it. We call the process of forming that judgment deliberation. By virtue of these principles, to us deliberative democracy is the political form in which decisions are the result of a process of exchanging arguments in which the citizens as a whole participate.

In this definition, the verb "to participate" constitutes the key to the vault because, in the societies, the presence of all citizens in decision making is not viable. But this material impossibility does not have to undermine the value of deliberation. What must be presupposed is the fiction of a public sphere where the physical presence of people is not as transcendental as that of their arguments. Without this space where reasons are exchanged, it is not possible to conceive either deliberative democracy or democracy without adjectives.

However, this space of public deliberation in contemporary democratic societies is mediated by companies that develop a journalistic activity under the protection of the right to information and freedom of expression. We want to ask ourselves what are the distortions that, about deliberation, these media, generally private companies, produce and how a normative theory of the media that responds to the demands of deliberative democracy could be articulated.

27

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

2. OBJECTIVES

In this article we will argue in favor of the need for a normative theory of the media of broad audiences in the context of theories of deliberative democracy. Likewise, we will present some of the elements that can contribute to the formulation of this theory, with particular emphasis on the issues of setting the media agenda and framing the informative contents.

3. METHODOLOGY

We will start from the formulations on the public sphere developed by Jürgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib to achieve a concept that satisfies the normative and utopian approaches to deliberative democracy. Then we will make a brief presentation of the demands that the theories of deliberative democracy demand from the media. We will continue with an analysis of the functioning of the media in those aspects that have the greatest impact on deliberation in the public sphere: the *agenda-setting* and the framing of the informative contents. We will conclude with some proposals on the role of the media in achieving better public deliberation in democratic societies.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Deliberative democracy and public sphere

Within the critical theory, Jürgen Habermas must be given the credit for having brought to the forefront the question of the public sphere as the space where legitimacy finds the exercise of political power in democratic societies.

In *History and Criticism of Public Opinion* Habermas presents the conditions that made possible the birth of a public sphere in the 18th century and the reasons that led to its collapse at the end of the later century (Habermas, 2002). The German philosopher defines the public sphere as the place where private individuals discuss what begins to be understood as "the public", which encompasses the action of governments and issues that affect the entire society. It is a deliberation in which the victory of the best argument is presupposed.

Also, Habermas's thesis of the decline of this space, the result of the expansion of the publics, beyond the bourgeois class, due to the birth of new demands and social inequalities caused by the pernicious onset of industrial capitalism is well known.

Thus, the previous space for deliberation will become an area of competition between competing interests that demand legislative reforms. The law, far from being already the

28

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 / 15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

expression of the general interest, is now oriented to satisfy the demands of the different particular groups. Habermas has spoken, in this regard, of a *refeudalization* of the public sphere, co-opted by interest groups that negotiate outside public knowledge.

To this refeudalization helped the development of the media of large audiences that, even being transmitters of information, became, at the same time, commercial institutions seeking consumers who offered a one - way communication from top to bottom depriving them of the possibility of "speaking and replicating" (Habermas, 2000, p. 199).

With these dynamics, says Habermas, representation and appearance on the public stage replace the debate. Habermas's bleak conclusion is that it is no longer possible to recover the primitive public sphere and we should be satisfied only with the stimulation of a public dialogue between social organizations to which we can claim little more than the adoption of deliberation mechanisms both in their internal regime and in the relations between them (Habermas, 1974, p. 55).

In the 1990s, with texts such as the prologue to the 1990 German edition of *History and Criticism of Public Opinion* and the *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas addresses the criticisms that, especially from feminist positions, had awakened his previous work. He was reproached for the absence of equality in that public sphere, from which women were absent, the lack of appreciation of other subordinate spaces, where deliberative processes were also carried out, and having ignored the emancipating potential of the media.

In this regard, Nancy Fraser's contribution was fundamental in her article "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" (Fraser, 1990) as the philosopher challenges Habermas's premises such as the one stating that the participation in the public space presupposes the equality of the participants, when the truth is that, in the liberal model, inequalities are placed in parentheses only for men. This invites the philosopher to consider that political participation requires not only the recognition of formal equality, but also substantive social equality. If these inequalities cannot be thematized, the public sphere becomes a form of domination without any utopian potential.

In parallel, the American philosopher distinguishes between *weak* audiences, those in which there is an unregulated deliberation, but in which no decisions are made, which links to a "context of discovery"; and the *strong* publics, constituted by the spaces in which, as in the legislative chambers, deliberation follows rules and decisions are made, a space that corresponds to a "context of justification".

29

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

Habermas agrees with Fraser in pointing out that the public opinion space has to be conceived as a network, a space in which political influence is formed and struggles to have influence, but no decisions are made, since decisions correspond to the political sphere legitimized to make them (Habermas, 1998, p. 407).

This characterization of the public sphere within the framework of the dialogue between Habermas and Fraser is taken up by Benhabib in her version of deliberative democracy. In her opinion, the public sphere worthy of a deliberative democracy must comply with the three demands of the ideal situation of Habermas's speech, with the nuances introduced by the author herself: 1) the equal and symmetrical participation of all those concerned by the debates; 2) the possibility of proposing and questioning the agenda; and 3) the possibility of questioning the own rules of the debate.

To these three elements we could add a fourth, which would be the rationality of the debate itself. As Rousiley Maia (Maia, 2007, p. 73) points out, the public sphere must resemble the ideal speech situation, with all its idealizations, although it is clear that the public debate has unreasonable restrictions and, therefore, it must be expressed more realistically However, this expression is necessary if we want to distinguish processes that are more or less deliberative. The public sphere must be subject to a criterion of rationality if it is about saving the asymmetries of power or amplitude of the points of view (Benhabib, 2006, pp. 105 et seq.).

Assuming this tradition, Benhabib considers it necessary to enrich Habermas's and Fraser's theory of the public sphere with some reflections on the work of Hannah Arendt (Benhabib, 1994) and in particular his idea that public space is an associative and grouping space for the formation of power, a dimension that is diluted in the liberal model. Thus, like Fraser and Habermas, but with a very different accent, Benhabib understands that the link between the civic public sphere and the institutional sphere is mainly made through the media. However, the question of how the presence of such mediation can affect the conditions that make the public sphere the seat of the legitimacy of political decisions has not deserved much greater consideration by the theories of deliberative democracy.

It seems clear that a deliberative theory of democracy must respond to how it is possible to make the legitimacy of power depend on social deliberation when such deliberation is mediated by media that, in the free market countries, are mostly private companies with a profit motive.

4.2. Media and deliberative democracy

The media have a peculiar nature. On the one hand, the fundamental rights letters guarantee the rights to information and freedom of expression to citizens. In democratic

30

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

countries of our environment, these rights are realized through private companies, making it easier for corporations with greater financial resources to have numerous and powerful loudspeakers to address society. This reality poses a challenge to the principle of equal participation of theories of deliberative democracy, while introducing the market system into the process of public deliberation.

On the other hand, theories of deliberative democracies impose on the media the realization of a public service that, if necessary, could harm their income statement. At the same time, they are assured that they can cope with social and economic work, with full autonomy and under the protection of rights that limit political interference with its operation. This way, it is achieved that the media products enjoy greater freedom of production and circulation than the rest of the goods on the market.

It is also true that the media are subject to some restrictions, since they can only obtain their economic benefit by demonstrating to publicists that they have an influence on public opinion, which is only possible if the public recognizes them as public service companies. However, this is not always the case, nor, if it were, is it defined in any way what this service consists in, what the legitimate means to perform it are, what the consequences of its non-compliance are and what mechanisms society has to sanction them Under the axiom that the best press law is one that does not exist, we find a fairly deregulated economic sector well protected by a relatively ideological mantle that makes regulation difficult.

Therefore, a normative theory of the media must keep this ambivalence in mind, because, as Habermas has pointed out, in the same way that the media can considerably strengthen the effectiveness of social controls due to their authoritarian potential, this possibility is always precarious because of the emancipating potential they in turn entail (Habermas, 2009). This happens because, in his opinion, no communication can be totally shielded "against the possibility of being contradicted by acts capable of responding autonomously for their own acts and their own opinions" (Habermas, 2010, p. 926). The German philosopher considers that the media cannot escape, without conflict, the obligations arising from their journalistic mission (Habermas, 2010, p. 927), but it is no less true that this conflict can become unproductive in societies that have lost confidence in their media.

4.3. Towards a normative theory of the media

In Habermas's deliberative democracy model, the media of broad audiences play a structural role in the revitalization of political deliberation. And, although he had addressed it before, it will be in the first decade of this century when we can find in two texts an excellent starting point for a theory of the media. These are "Media, markets and consumers: The press would be the backbone of the political public sphere" and

31

"Does democracy still have an epistemic dimension? Empirical research and normative theory", both included in the volume *¡Ah, Europe! Small political writings* (Habermas, 2009). In them Habermas develops a scheme of the function that the media are called upon to play in deliberative democracy, while going into detail about the risk of commercialization of journalistic companies and the consequent drift towards the entertainment industry (Habermas, 2009).

Thus, according to the German philosopher, in today's societies a circuit of political communication is created on all three levels: that of the formal sphere of institutionalized discourses of the political system, where deliberations regarding the norms and binding decisions are made. and that matches Fraser's definition of a strong public sphere; the level of communication of broad audiences based on the media and in which public opinions are expressed; and the level of the daily communication of society, which is carried out in the informal public spheres and within organizations, where the views are born and configured, coinciding with the definition of a weak or informal public sphere.

The mediation carried out by the media between the formal sphere and the informal sphere can only be effective if the receiving public is able to understand the discourses of the political system by adopting reasoned positions towards the relevant issues.

Habermas himself is aware that this requirement can be "excessive and amazing" in the light of research on public ignorance. These studies seem to draw "a disappointing portrait of the average citizen as a largely uninformed and selfless person" (Habermas, 2009, p. 171). However, Habermas does not rule out that it may happen in the long term because it depends, to a large extent, on the way in which matters are presented.

If the media fulfill their mediating function, the result obtained from this communicative circulation between the center and the periphery, Habermas points out, is the *reasoned public opinions*, as the peculiar product of the public sphere. If the media convert the relevant issues "into well-posed problems", public communication will display and guide the formation of the opinion and will of citizens while forcing the political system to adapt and be more transparent (Habermas , 2009, p. 162).

4.3.1. The agenda and the framing of deliberation

Habermas's normative approach to the media may seem very ambitious when contrasted with the structure and usual journalistic practice in the countries around us. In the case of Spain, it is enough to mention the polarized form in which the Catalan question is informed or about the different demands of women's groups. It is not uncommon to find, even in the most respectable headers, the breath of confrontation and the absence of arguments.

32

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

This attitude, which in days gone by was more typical of the television medium, affects even leading paper headers today, a sector that Habermas calls the "reasoning" publications because, due to their slow form of elaboration, they should contribute through opinion articles to the formation of better formed judgments, more sophisticated frames and greater reflexivity. But, as the German philosopher rightly points out, the formation of a reasoned public judgment requires that good information be available and the creation of a framework that allows for its understanding, work that involves costly journalistic research and a professional staff trained to understand political and social dynamics and, above all, talent for deliberative practice.

Habermas also adds the need to bring the relevant issues to the forefront, including the most controversial ones, with all the relevant information and the most outstanding arguments for and against. This refers to the well-known *agenda-setting function* of the media of wide audiences, according to the theory developed by Donald Shaw, David Weaver and Maxwell McCombs (McCombs, 2015).

These authors have found that the influence of the media on public opinion lies, rather than in their ability to force a change in position from an informational stimulus (theory hypodermic needle), in establishing the subjects on which the receivers formulate their opinions. The effect of the agenda is demonstrated by observing the correlation between the published news and the issues that people consider relevant, according to opinion polls done for this purpose (McCombs, 2015, p. 114). The intensity of this effect is measured through an equation with two parameters: relevance and uncertainty. Relevance points to the need of the subjects for guidance, according to which we need more guidance on issues that seem more relevant to us. Uncertainty has to do with the degree of prior knowledge we have on these issues: the less we know the more susceptible we are to be influenced by the media. The more relevance and uncertainty the greater the degree of correlation in the *agenda-setting* effect (McCombs, 2015, pp. 63 et seq.).

This ability to set the agenda poses challenges to the theories of deliberative democracy, since the media are responsible for selecting the topics of public debate and, at the same time, they enjoy the power to close the access door to the issues they either place in the private sphere or do not consider to be of general interest. It is a substantial power that, with the development of capitalism and the expansion of large media corporations, has been transferred to large corporations in which economic and political power come together. This is what Bernardo Díaz Nosty calls the pre-agenda, that is, the set of relationships and interests that impose on the issuer a series of informative commitments, from magnifying events of low interest, camouflaging what is simply advertising, to no issues relevant to safeguard the business or political reputation of the news subject (Díaz Nosty, 2008).

33

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

The selection of the relevant issues by the media is also due to criteria that can range from the dynamics of journalistic companies, the biases and abilities of professionals or the cost of covering certain facts; to the unmentionable influences of the different social and economic powers on the media.

The result, in any case, is that, generally, the most powerful voices have more influence to highlight issues relevant to their particular interests, while minority voices, let alone conflictive ones, find much greater difficulty when it comes to "place" theirs, even if these issues are socially more relevant than the others. As Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1990) points out, the media are commercial companies within the framework of the capitalist system, companies with their own economic dynamics and their tendencies to marginalize those subaltern discourses whose vocation is precisely to put in the spotlight the *status quo* to which communication companies belong.

The condition of media independence from political power is often affected by this collusion of media, economic and political interests in the same corporations, interests that result in closing access to the media for those social sectors that contradict the commercial or political aspirations of the owners of the media. These distortions, says Habermas, are what contribute to citizens distancing themselves from politics and to spreading private and anti-political moods (Habermas, 2009, pp. 172-180).

It should not be ignored, however, that the presence of multiple instances of power in society allows some compensation game, to the extent in which conflicts between these organizations guarantee a relative range of issues in the media. However, this variety still does not mean that the format is appropriate for deliberative democracy, since the other form of influence of the media on public opinion is made through the framing effect (*issue framing*). Indeed, defining the perspective of the debate is even more decisive for the quality of the deliberative process and influence on public opinion than the effect of *agenda-setting* (McCombs, 2015, p. 51). That is to say, the media not only *set a* good part of the public agenda, *what* we think *about*, but also influence on *how* we think through the framing function.

Framing information is to journalism what montage is to the world of cinematography. It is not the same to place a case of violence against women in the events section than in the policy section. In the events section, the message issued is that these cases are private matters that, due to their truculence, deserve to be transferred to the public sphere, while in the policy section it is given the relevance of a matter of general interest that should have a legislative and executive response from administrations. Depending on how the information is framed, public deliberation is being directed towards a certain sense and sponsoring that the consensus reached be determined by that framework. Thus, not infrequently it will be better that a problem does not come to the agenda media before it comes in inappropriate framing conditions.

34

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

This can happen when the information is framed following the pattern of the conflict, a scheme to which the media are sensitive. It is about presenting the present in a polarized way, as the result of the antagonism between irreconcilable extremes. In this framework, the most reasonable opinions are eclipsed for the benefit of those that, especially on television, attract a larger audience. It is, as Habermas affirms, to derive revenue from *infotainment*, a genre in which information is presented under the entertainment format, framing the issues in such a way that, rather than reaching a consensus, they seem to foster confrontation. This is a modality that best fits the canons of the show (Habermas, 2009, p. 179).

Info-entertainment is to the detriment of other more favorable schemes for public discussion, as could be the problem-solution formats or simply presenting the largest possible number of voices about an issue. It is already known that, in this respect, an exhaustive framing is as impossible as an agenda that covers all topics, but the range of voices can be extended far beyond the confinements suffered by the current media.

Another effect of bad framing is the treatment of corruption cases. One of the main functions of the media is to be the spokespersons for the demand for responsibility to public officials. This mission is not satisfied by being a mere transmission channel for innumerable cases of corruption treated as events, but with an implication in the evaluation, in the demand for reasons and in the verification of the adaptation to democratic values (Ettema, 2007, pp. 143-160). In addition, the need to be involved in matters of general interest and to participate in them should be encouraged in the public, instead of leading them to cynicism that all persons engaged in politics are suspected of having committed corruption in the past. This so-called *Watergate* syndrome has ruined more political than journalistic careers.

4.3.2. The deliberative media

It is possible to distinguish four journalistic traditions that make up, each of them, four media ecosystems (Christians *et al.,* 2009, pp. 19 et seq.). On the one hand, the *corporate* model defines a press with a social vocation within the framework of societies with a marked communitarian accent and centralized control of the media themselves. This model corresponds not only to that of the press of authoritarian systems, but also to those of certain democracies of an administrative nature such as those in force in some Asian countries. An agenda established by political and economic systems prevails, with little influence from minority social groups. The usual scheme of information is due to the structure of presentation of the problem and its solution. The purpose of the press is to keep the public informed to ensure their collaboration on what has already been decided to do.

35

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

The second media ecosystem is the *libertarian* model, consisting of capitalist autonomous enterprises protected by a rigid press freedom that prevents minimal intervention on them. It is an individualist press. Preponderant in the United States and increasingly frequent in southern Europe, it flourishes in situations of polarized pluralism, understood as the presence of two strongly confronted political tendencies, which motivates a highly politicized agenda and informative schemes based on conflict and show.

Thirdly, we would find a system of *citizen responsibility* media, constituted by an alternative press to the hegemonic one that favors a form of civic democracy open to greater participation, diversity, localism and forms of direct democracy. Newspapers and radio and television stations of feminist groups, environmentalists and social activists are grouped here. This model plays an important counterpoint role within other media ecosystems. The agenda consists of exposed social issues seeking citizen involvement in the resolution of issues.

Finally, the *social responsibility* model is constituted around a subset of headers whose performance is informed by the principle of responsibility before society. Present in certain areas of central and northern Europe, it comprises a few media but with a wide audience and very regulated by state and local laws to limit their operations in the market. In these media, the agenda is usually more open to issues that interest the most significant social groups, as a result of the presence of their representatives in their editorial boards. In their optimal functioning, socio-economic and political information is usually framed not for the convenience of corporations, but under the perspective of the general interest, favoring decision-making through deliberation on the different courses of action that can be followed.

In any society, these models coexist which, after all, are ideal types. On the other hand, each media can share traits of each of the species, the dominant one defining its character.

It is clear that the most appropriate model for the theory of deliberative democracy, that of social responsibility, is in serious decline in the whole of Europe due to this deregulation of the sector. The headers that once played a role in the dissemination of a certain democratic culture have been losing their identity due, in many cases, to a risky policy of expansion that has made them hostage to debt holders. The vocation of social responsibility must be sought today in some digital headers that have recovered journalistic practices more sensitive to social issues and the defense of democratic values, but whose budgetary limitations prevent them from reaching high levels of dissemination.

36

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

In this landscape of media, deliberative democracy has serious difficulties in becoming a practical instrument that extends social deliberation. For this to be so, society should bear the cost of sustaining a media structure oriented by social responsibility and strong enough to become the core of social deliberation. To the extent in which they perform an important public service with little market value, private funding of these media should be enhanced through a transparent and regulated public input to ensure greater reach. The counterpart to this financing through taxes should be that of a regulation that not only takes them away from market dynamics but also guides them to the promotion of social deliberation. It would be, as Habermas points out, to assume that political communication is a consumer good of a special nature, a good that, by affecting a fundamental right such as that of information, cannot be resolved through the market (Habermas, 2009, p. 131).

This strengthening of the private press should be complemented by a reorientation of the public media to improve its service to the defense of social diversity. This conglomerate of radio and television, whose diffusion extends to the whole state, is particularly useful for promoting Benhabib's exercise of the enlarged mentality. The public media are in the best conditions to undo those clichés and those false generalizations that often explain moral failures (Habermas, 2009, p. 134). As Benhabib points out regarding this media function: "More structured narratives and storytelling can help to form an expanded mindset and the ability to take the point of view of others in deliberative processes. This is where there is a role for the right kind of journalism and the media, because journalism is really what makes us present (re-presents) to those whose stories we cannot hear or share in the first person" (Benhabib, 2008).

Thus, while, in Arendt's terms, social responsibility media promote the habit of *reflection*, public media facilitate *imagination*, constitutive elements both of moral and political judgment.

To remedy the risks posed by democracy for the excessive growth of today's hegemonic and dominant presence of libertarian media in the hands of business and financial conglomerates requires an exercise of passivity by public administrations and the regulation of the tendency to absorb, buy and concentrate media both at national and supranational levels. Without the mercantilist liberalization and the opportunistic assistance provided by public administrations to these media, their dissemination would be reduced to the limit of reasonableness, that is, to the point where they cannot decisively determine the course of public deliberation but participate in it as one more voice. A democracy cannot aspire to full legitimacy as long as it continues to consent to the validity of the principle that the greater the economic power, the greater the capacity to influence the public sphere, because that means transferring the proof of democratic legitimacy to the market.

37

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

With these reforms, progress can be made in satisfying one of the dimensions of deliberative democracy, one that is oriented towards collective decisions through consensus. But, as Rodney Benson has pointed out (Benson, 2009, p. 182), the proactive potential of the media in the public sphere should not be underestimated and entrusted completely to regulation, in the same way that, we say, all the activity of the public sphere cannot be subordinated to the achievement of said consensus. Therefore, we must insist on Benhabib's thesis that the effective participation of people in decision-making processes is at least as important as the decision reached. Therefore, it must be concluded that a media system that does not consider the presence and protection of media that contribute to give voice to those who, due to the social inequality or minority of their claims, have greater difficulty in accessing communication systems of a wider scope, does not meet the demands of critical theory. A healthy democracy that does not want to become a form of majority domination over minorities must establish the mechanisms for these media to enjoy vitality and not find obstacles to their development. This is a utopian demand that makes it possible to broaden the practice of democracy beyond institutional boundaries.

These ideas for restructuring the media do not solve by themselves the problem of setting the public agenda and schemes under which informative texts are presented, problems whose causes are due to both structural factors of the reporting process itself and conjunctural factors that respond to the laziness and domination of journalistic traditions and practices that in no way favor public deliberation.

The establishment of the public agenda requires more than a reform of the status of companies, the promotion of a journalistic culture that is guided by the requirement to provide citizens with useful information for the formation of judgments on matters of relevance. Such a guide should replace the current one, aimed at offering a huge amount of information in the shortest possible time. A kind of journalism useful for the practice of deliberative democracy should prioritize the quality of the debate on the amount of information. As Benhabib herself has pointed out, during the prolegomena of the 2003 Iraq war, the profusion of news did not translate into greater deepening of the debate (Benhabib, 2008).

This reflexivity must also reach the question of the presentation of informative texts, since the media must fulfill the function of serving as platforms for this intelligible and illuminating exposition of the various political opinions that Habermas points to. In order for the media to fulfill that function, J. S. Ettema points out that it would be necessary for the media to respond to the requirement to give access to the different voices that may concur in the debate, recognize those different voices as equal in law and have the sensitivity *(responsiveness)* to demand that each of the voices respect all the others (Ettema, 2007, p. 156). The deliberation is not the sequential expression of individual opinions, nor the channeling of opinions in the sense of a consensus that has

38

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

been foreseen in advance, but rather to reason together (Christians *et al.,* 2009, pp. 29 et seq.). Nor is it a talk, but a form of dialogue oriented to some kind of action. For this, the public must be understood in a plural way, a public of audiences, with the regulatory ideal of making all the people both represented in the speech and able to show their preference for a certain direction of the action (Benhabib, 2008). To deliberate means understanding the other's reasons through this exercise of the expanded mentality that should be a central element in the training of all journalists.

To this end, journalistic training in universities can provide better argumentative resources for applicants to be part of the profession, as the journalist must be trained not only as a moderator of outside arguments, but also as a participant, and very prominent, in the debate. For that reason, society can and should demand responsibility for its exercise. Therefore, change in professional practices must be stimulated, so that the selection of public agenda items is the result of a process of giving and asking for reasons, in which each one questions what public matters could merit to appear in the media if their choice were subject to the demanding conditions of the ideal speech situation. As Ettema points out, to the extent in which journalism is an eminently political activity, journalists are also obliged to observe reality from the point of view of justice (Ettema, 2007, p. 143).

In Benhabib's terms, observing society from that point of view implies responding to the individual's demands as *a generalized one*. This satisfies the *norm*. But the media have to consider the public agenda also according to the demands of the other concrete one, by way of giving voice to those underrepresented segments in society, segments that are most in need of their voice being heard. That is what allows us to talk about a *utopian* dimension of the public sphere: "At its best, journalism does this; extend your worldview by making you see the world through the eyes of the others. It informs, while expanding empathy through time and space. The best type of journalism has this ability to unite the dignity of the generalized one with empathy for the concrete one" (Benhabib, 2008).

4.4. Media and democracy, a utopian reverie?

Theories of deliberative democracy are presented as a formula with which to contrast the degree of legitimacy of legal systems and legislative and governmental decisions. With this dimension, the normative aspirations of critical theory are satisfied. But if, with Seyla Benhabib, the utopian aspirations of transforming the present moment are also sought to be satisfied, democracy must also become, in a way of life, a way of being together through the effective and continuous deliberation in decision making that affects all citizens. To satisfy this utopian aspiration, it is necessary to promote a civic ethic that recognizes in each individual the right to express their desires and concerns and to question the arrangements that define the present way of life. And it must

39

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

provide it with means so that these desires and questions can be heard and thus have the possibility of promoting transformations.

We must regret, however, that the media are more appropriate instruments to reinforce values and to perpetuate stereotypes than to transform them. If we add to this the capacity of the media to impose the issues discussed in the public space and their ability to frame them, it is easy to understand why certain values are perpetuated that do not favor either the promotion of democracy or the promises of freedom, equality and justice.

That is why we understand that a theory of deliberative democracy that does not account for the role played by these instruments is an incomplete theory. If the adequacy of the public sphere to democracy depends on the quality of the speeches and the quality of participation, then the quality of the media will be a good indicator of the quality of democracy (Calhoun, 1992, p. 2). There is no point that broad sectors of society refine knowledge and arguments if they cannot be known to the public because they are closed to the media. The purpose of a political communication for democracy is to offer opportunities for inclusion to all the voices involved, and such inclusion is measured by checking whether the media make social inequalities visible, if they give voice to the different groups, if they admit the permeability between the public and private areas and if they encourage discussions to become transformations.

Nowadays we cannot expect the changes needed to occur by the mere development of communication technologies, for nothing assures us that this technological utopia is oriented towards the progress of rights and freedoms. However, we agree with Javier Muguerza (Muguerza, 2006, p. 397) that the renunciation of the finalist utopia, to that final point of history, does not imply the renunciation of the anticipation of a better world, what Kant called Hope for the future. Although that better world is achieved by putting "greater emphasis on the ability of practical reason to say "no" to the present world - to 'react against what should not be' and 'rebel against evil and injustice'" Perhaps a normative theory of the media only serves us to legitimately raise that "no", but that refusal would not be a small thing compared to the worst of utopias: the utopia of the *status quo*, as defined by Robert Musil (Gomez, 2007, p. 504).

Media at the service of democracy would constitute, at the same time, an *immanent utopia* and a *transcendent utopia* in the terms defined by Seyla Benhabib. Immanent because in reality there is already the germ of what it can be, it is not yet. Transcendent because it projects the *could be* of the future over the *is not* of the present. But this utopia does not strive to achieve an ideal society or a happy ending. It is projected to a fairer, freer and more plural society. That is, a society where the *norm* is respected and to think about *utopia* is allowed.

40

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44

As Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 1990) has pointed out, the public sphere can be both an instrument of domination and an element with emancipating potentialities. There is no doubt that the media can tip the balance to one side or the other.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have pointed out some suggestions that would allow us to respond affirmatively to the question of whether it is possible to base a normative theory of the media on democratic societies. These suggestions guide us towards the need to intervene in the dynamics of public and private communication companies to reorient them at the service of the general interest, safeguarding at all times the fundamental rights to freedom of expression and information. Likewise, we have put forward some ways to achieve the socialization of the public agenda to stimulate the presence in it of the relevant issues that concern the well-being of citizens as a whole. Finally, we have pointed out the ways in which the provision of informative contents could contribute to a fairer representation of the interests of social groups, particularly those in situations of vulnerability and inequality.

With this we have not tried to exhaust the question but, rather, to continue stimulating the need to continue to study, from philosophy, the possibilities of adaptation of the public sphere to the demands of a deliberative democracy whose emancipating potential lies in satisfying the demands of the *norm* and of the *utopia* in the terms in which Seyla Benhabib has defined them.

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41

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42

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43

Vivat Academia. Revista de Comunicación. 15 December 2019 /15 March 2020, nº 149, 25-44