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One opinion among many? On the definition of counter-publicity and overcoming its limits

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The frequently diagnosed and described crisis of the media (see Meyen 2021, Meyen 2018, Klöckner 2021, Krüger 2016, among others) is an expression of a social crisis in capitalism – whereby capitalism itself is the cause of the crisis or the crisis itself. In other words: “What is wrongly referred to as a ‘newspaper crisis’ or even a ‘media crisis’ is nothing other than a capitalistically shaped, strategically oriented transformation process in the media industry to secure the individual accumulation of capital in the competition between media owners.” (Knoche 2014: 255) In this article, I will focus on the reactions to this crisis in the media and journalism. When the media no longer reach certain people, when certain positions no longer appear in public, a counter-public arises. This is a historical fact – to think only of the emergence of the social democratic press in the 19th century along with the practice of banning it, or the counter-public sphere, in this case also as a term that emerged in the course of the extra-parliamentary opposition of the late 1960s. In recent years, too, more new publications have emerged, while others have gained in scope. The counter-public sphere is diverse and exists alongside the traditional media – as a result of the respective criticism of the media or also out of frustration on the part of journalists because they cannot (or can no longer) operate the agenda-setting for certain topics.

The new media of the counter-public sphere exist alongside the old, whereby some of these – the best known of which in Germany is certainly the daily newspaper taz – are now part of the mainstream. Most of the new counter-public media can be found on the internet, publishing articles, videos and podcasts. But radio and television stations have also emerged (on the Internet), as have new magazines. The quality of these media is diverse, as are the topics they discuss. This would be worthy a further analysis. At this point, however, the focus shall be less on specific available offers, even if this essay cannot – and should not – do without references to historical and current examples of counter-public media.

I am trying, instead, to close a gap with this text. Because a theoretical reflection on the counter-public sphere and its relation to the “dominant public sphere” of the legacy media is important in order to understand the possibilities, but also the limits, of those media outlets within the counter-public sphere. It is important for the constant self-reflection and self-criticism of practitioners. It can help to broaden the view beyond the existing. This will be addressed toward the end of this paper, where I will try to step out of the dichotomy between the counter-public sphere and the dominant public sphere and present thoughts on a “self-organized public sphere” as an alternative. However, while the counter-public sphere and its media and concrete examples should also be mentioned, this alternative is above all a logical continuation of the following definitions and a consequence of the consideration of their limits.

Why “counter-public”? When we look at the oppositional media, they refer to the legacy media, the mainstream. They act in opposition to it, distance themselves from it, but ultimately remain within its logic. The counter-public follows the leading media, it tries to close blind spots and express what is not being said (or not allowed to be said) elsewhere. It takes up topics that do not appear in the mainstream. It adds a perspective that is rarely found elsewhere. The term indicates the thrust of the criticism expressed in the alternative media, the media in opposition to the mainstream. “Counter-public sphere means a partial public sphere directed against a hegemonic public sphere, which is structured around a specific social discourse or point of view.” (Kotz 1998: 653) It is therefore directed against the dominant discourse, the discourse of those in power, which can also be called the “mainstream”. I use these terms synonymously. Some of the media are also directed against the prevailing form of societal organization, capitalist socialization as a whole.

The public and legacy media

In order to define the possibilities and limits of the counter-public in more detail, the concept of the public sphere in capitalism and its limits must first be defined. A counter-public sphere would have to address these limits if it aims to point beyond the existing bourgeois public sphere. But what is the “public sphere” to begin with and how exactly should this much-used term be defined? This is hardly ever attempted today. Hans J. Kleinsteuber (2005) has summarized this in a short encyclopedia article: “The public sphere has been discussed in Germany for two centuries and now defies any clear definition.” There is an ideological background to this, as the principle of the public sphere is constitutive of bourgeois society and parliamentary democracy and stands in contrast to the arcane principle of absolutism.

Historically, the public sphere emerges in the bourgeoisie’s defensive struggle against censorship, in the fight to ensure that state affairs would no longer be negotiated in secret, but become public and that citizens were to have a say. In this sense, public is the opposite of secret (cf. Hölscher 1978). Today, the contrast between public and private applies, so that very decisive fields – socialization in the family and the world of work – are kept out of the discussion (cf. Negt/Kluge 1972: 10). I will come back to this at the end of the text and this would already be an important limit of the public sphere in capitalism, the bourgeois public sphere.

Jürgen Habermas (1990: 119), whose 1963 study “Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit” (Structural Change of the Public Sphere) is still of great importance in media and communication studies and beyond, describes the historical development as follows: “In the bourgeois public sphere, a political consciousness unfolds that articulates the concept and demand of general and abstract laws against absolute rule, and finally also learns to assert itself, namely public opinion, as the only legitimate source of these laws.” For Habermas, too, the public sphere is therefore a decisive element in the constitution of bourgeois society, of representative democracy.

Kleinsteuber (2005), on the other hand, distinguishes between the public sphere as a matter of fact versus concept: “As a matter of fact, the classification is simple: the public sphere exists when free accessibility is present, historically for example in court hearings and parliamentary sessions. The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany stipulates (Article 42.1): ‘The Bundestag shall deliberate in public’. In this sense, the public is always present when accessibility for the general public is guaranteed. This accessibility can be established

both directly, via the media, and virtually (on the Internet).”

If we start from this definition of the public sphere as a state of affairs, which can be derived from the aforementioned opposite of the secret-private, then the public sphere has been established in the present day – whereby we initially ignore the various subliminal and overt forms of censorship (see most recently Hofbauer 2022). In the ideal-typical bourgeois understanding, there is an open arena of free exchange of opinions in society, so to speak, in which the better argument prevails. “The public sphere defines a sphere outside the state in which citizens – initiated by and articulated via the media – critically and discursively accompany political events.” (Kleinsteuber 2005)

This definition already references the media that create the public sphere. The media and their form of organization are therefore crucial. Through them, the citizens’ prerequisites for the discursive accompaniment of political events are not the same; publishers and politicians determine the direction (Berliner Autorenkollektiv Presse 1972: 23ff.). This idea thus becomes an ideology (understood as “false consciousness”) and many representatives of bourgeois, capitalist society do not recognize (or do not want to recognize) this problem of the public sphere. If we unravel the mystery of the dominant public sphere, we can state with Carsten Prien that no single opinion can be considered as the general opinion, if only because there are other opinions (Prien 2019: 118).

In other words: In the dominant public sphere, opinions relativize each other. Criticism is voiced, but it is irrelevant insofar as it does not gain any validity. But how do the mainstream and the “dominant” public opinion and a counter-public that criticizes it come about? Carsten Prien (ibid.) writes that ultimately the “normative power of the factual” remains: “The formalistically conducted discussion necessarily affirms the false conditions based on power and violence.” The conditions can seemingly be questioned (for example by a counter-public), but the questioning has no consequences, because: “Consequently, only the statement whose publication has the greatest scope of acceptance is regarded as public opinion on a topic.”

Media monopolies or leading media are also able to manipulate opinions because the anonymous and isolated public itself does not clarify its interests in an organized way, but is addressed as a dispersed public, in other words: people circulate in the public sphere as abstract “citizens” or “private individuals” (ibid.: 119). Both are abstractions of the concrete individual. These can only be overcome through an organization based on interests and experiences.

Because the audience does not organize itself, it is not the common interests and conflicting interests that form the basis for the evaluation of content, but rather the media monopolies can present it in their own interests through their selection, so that the interests of capital appear to be the interests of all. This is ultimately the normative power of the factual. An easily comprehensible example of this would be the saying: “If the economy is doing well, we are all doing well”, which is the basis of (neo)liberal ideology and secretly decouples the economy from the people. If we take people, the subjects, as our starting point, it should rather read: “If people are doing well, they are administering the economy well” (Exner 2022: 30f.).

A counter-public is directed against the normative power of the factual described above. It criticizes and, at best, attempts to point beyond it. This is only possible if it attempts to abolish the mechanisms of the public sphere as described in its own organizational form.

Before getting to this point, I would like to take a closer look at the counter-public sphere. Today, we are mostly talking about media on the Internet such as *Nachdenkseiten*, *Rubikon*, *Apolut* or *Kontrafunk* (in Germany). In the print sector, in addition to the classic media of the (left-wing) counter-public such as the daily newspaper *junge Welt*, which on some topics – especially in the assessment of the corona measures – stood and still stands on the side of the mainstream and thus ultimately of those in power, there are also new start-ups such as the newspaper *Demokratischer Widerstand* or *Die Vierte*. Conservative papers such as *Tichys Einblick* or *Tumult* as well as *Junge Freiheit* or *Sezession*, which are often called right-wing-conservative or even right-wing-extremist, can also be counted among the media of the counter-public. They explicitly oppose the mainstream and devote themselves to topics that have no place in the legacy media or articulate positions that are not represented there. In the following attempts at a definition, the aim will be to understand and determine more precisely the different attitudes and the consequences of the respective media practice by means of gradations of the terms.

For the time being, we will stick with the simple description of the counter-public sphere as a kind of mirror of the dominant, leading media public sphere. Following Michael Meyen (2021: 36), we can state that the aforementioned media expand the space of what can be said, but at the same time shrink it again, because politics and journalism “are knitting the myth of the mediatised center and biting off any competition” Meyen’s dictum does not leave the system of the media at this point. Elsewhere he writes (Meyen/von Mirbach: 152) that the leading media have created the “problem” of counter-public opinion themselves. “If everyone is satisfied with what is being discussed in the big arena, no one has a reason to leave their seat in the stands and place issues or positions in the public arena themselves.” At this point, Meyen is moving within a model of the civic public sphere that I have described as ideology. Following Meyen, one could call it a myth of pluralism. However, this definition does help us to understand the mechanisms within this system and also the reactions to counter-movements and concrete manifestations in the form of new media seemingly free from the constraints of the old media.

And finally: I would hold on to the goal of free speech and an open exchange of arguments as a utopia. In the bourgeois public sphere, in view of the structural conditions described above, the private ownership of the means of production, from which both the concentration of capital and the resulting monopolization arise, cannot be realized. Incidentally, a false alternative to this, that can merely be noted at this point, would be the nationalization of the means of production. The fact that the state would also restrict the corridor of opinion is already comprehensible to everyone today because the state already steers opinions under the currently prevailing conditions and actively engages in censorship in a variety of ways, for example via the new German Treaty between state and media (“*Medienstaatsvertrag*”; Hofbauer 2022: 143ff.). Certain conservative critics therefore also claim that the currently prevailing conditions are tantamount to socialism. They equate socialism with totalitarianism and are either unwilling or unable to acknowledge the compatibility of capitalism and totalitarianism (cf. the assessment of the petty-bourgeois protests against the corona measures in Bedszent 2023: 61f., more generally on the supposedly “left-wing” press Krüger 2016: 71f.).

Leading media and prevailing opinion

As part of the bourgeois media system, the media of the counter-public cannot penetrate

the center as competitors to the leading media. As long as they see themselves as such a part or act as such and close their eyes to the mechanisms of the public sphere, their criticism will necessarily remain ineffective. This is because these media “only” provide one – in this case a different, critical – opinion alongside others. In the following, I will shed some light on why this is the case, by examining the principle of the “counter-public sphere” in more detail and present various attempts to define it.

The prevailing conditions, and with them the prevailing public opinion, are at the center of this; they give rise to a counter-public. Let us first take another look at the leading media themselves. According to Michael Meyen (2020: 264f.), these are “offers that are perceived by decision-makers and unfold symbolic power in this social group just as they do in the general population, because we must assume that others also perceive them and align their behavior accordingly. To put it in a nutshell: what does not appear in the leading media or what is not marked as legitimate there does not exist (regardless of whether it concerns topics, people or positions). Leading media exist at a global and national level as well as at a regional or local level.”

Elsewhere, he writes (2022: 82): “The force of the leading media corresponds to a double projection. Firstly, we assume that everyone else has seen, read and heard the same thing. And secondly, we assume that the content has an effect – not on us, since after all, we are serene, but on the others. It doesn’t matter whether this is true or not.” The leading media thus become a “first-order reality”. However, as already stated, the content is not arbitrary. The extent to which they reproduce the ideas of those in power or benefit them determines whether they become valid and thus part of the discourse in the leading media. If this were not the case, it would be enough to combat the double projection described above and counter it with alternative perspectives.

The leading media thus show us “definitional power relations” (Ulrich Beck). Michael Meyen (Meyen/von Mirbach 2021: 155) follows Beck and argues: “To put it bluntly: Power today belongs to those who have the ‘necessary resources’ to impose their version of reality on the public.” Which ultimately brings us back to capitalism and the legitimization of the ideas of those in power that the leading media disseminate. And it is precisely by disseminating the positions of those in power that they become the leading media. It is a fixed core of media that sets the pace for other media. In addition to the main news programs of ARD and ZDF, these include the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *FAZ*, *Die Welt*, *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit* and their online offshoots (Krüger 2016: 29f.). The extent to which this works is demonstrated by the regular positive reaction of the opposition media to dissenting articles in the leading media and, conversely, the sharp criticism of dissenting positions in the leading media by their colleagues in the “mediatized center”.

Governments have a certain amount of access to the leading media through various channels such as the Federal Press Conference, joint organizations and meetings, as well as through the similar type of socialization of the elites (Krüger 2016: 85ff.). Rainer Mausfeld (2018: 204) notes that those who “have undergone the socialization tendencies of society the longest and thus tend to have internalized the prevailing ideology the most deeply are also the most likely to place themselves in the service of political and economic power elites”. In the course of their socialization, they would have internalized the structural mechanisms through which social recognition can be gained.

In addition, according to various studies, journalists mostly originate from the middle

class, summarizes Marcus Klöckner (2019: 33) and following Pierre Bourdieu outlines: “The habitus of the middle class often reveals a tendency to integrate into the prevailing structures in the best possible way. It is geared towards adaptation, the acceptance of power relations is part of its inner programming.” The special significance of the middle class for society has been the subject of many analyses, particularly in the wake of the rise of fascism in Germany and elsewhere, and I can only point this out here.

Back to journalism and politics: one originates from the same class and knows each other through other channels: Many spokespeople for state governments used to work for the major regional media themselves. In 2021, the transfer of three (out of four) state correspondents from regional newspapers to ministries in the state of Rhineland-Pfalz caused a stir (Schade 2021). The same applies to the government spokesperson in Berlin: following the former “Heute” presenter, Steffen Seibert, the former Berlin-correspondent of the DuMont publishing group, Steffen Hebestreit, took over as this position.

Not all media outlets write and broadcast in the exact same manner, nevertheless, a consensus exists, however, “a number of topics and opinions that dominate the media landscape in a certain period of time and thus form a ‘mainstream’ or a ‘main direction’” (Krüger 2016: 30). Uwe Krüger has coined the term “conspiracy of responsibility”, which aptly describes the close link between the elites in politics and the media. This is logical in a media system structured according to capitalist maxims and, as it were, necessary for its continued existence, as I have already pointed out.

In times of permanent crisis, the elites bond all the more closely, as Krüger analyzes (ibid.: 130), which is why the corridor of what can be said in the leading media is becoming increasingly restricted. “Dissenting opinions and references to systemic flaws and social contradictions are now found primarily outside of parliament and in an internet-based counter-public sphere, largely opposed by the political and media establishment.”

Inspired by Marcus Klöckner, Michael Meyen (Meyen/von Mirbach 2021: 152) speaks of two sides in the “journalistic field”, of a boundary between mainstream and counter-public, a “struggle for the sovereignty of interpretation and power of definition, in which, because of the position that media-mediated communication has in the traditional power structures, there is also the question of the system or, formulated in a somewhat less offensive way, the question of how we want to live together in the future.” To put it another way: if the bourgeois public sphere or its functioning is the existential basis of bourgeois society, then any critique of it becomes a critique of society. And if this becomes as radical as, for example, in Michael Meyen’s books and essays, it itself comes under criticism (cf. sensationalist Hildebrandt 2022, factual Weischenberg 2021, summarizing Köhler 2022).

Counter-public sphere & alternative media: attempts at a definition

But how is the counter-public to the mainstream of the leading media to be determined and defined? What does the term actually describe? In the literature, it is often traced back to the aforementioned book by Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. It had already been used in the course of the student movement of the 1960s, in which Negt and Kluge were also active. The term is used, for example, in a 1967 resolution of the SDS (1967: 34), the most important association of the anti-authoritarian movement in Germany at the time. The resolution is to be understood in the context of the campaign to expropriate the Springer Group and formulates the goal of “creating an enlightening counter-public, the dictatorship of the manipulators must be broken”.

In the revolutionary situation of the student movement, the counter-public sphere thus becomes a “concept of struggle that turns against the media system legitimizing the system of rule, against its structure and mode of operation” (Karl-Heinz Stamm cited in Oy 2003: 509). The criticism of today’s counter-public sphere is therefore by no means new; it can be traced back at least as far as the 1960s, although there were also media that explicitly opposed the mainstream before then. For our topic, however, this recourse to the tradition of the anti-authoritarian student movement will suffice for the time being. After the failure of direct action in the peak phase of the movement between 1967 and 1969, “the creation of a counter-public was propagated as a network of critical media projects” (Oy 2003: 509). As a result, many projects of alternative journalism emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, which were significantly inspired by Negt’s and Kluge’s theory.

The two authors distinguish the counter-public from a “critical public”, which in their view fits into the “symbolic spectrum of the bourgeois public” (Negt/Kluge 1972: 9). Accordingly, a “critical public sphere” operates within the framework of the existing media system and functions as evidence to the mainstream that a different opinion can be held after all. That this “critical public” does not gain further validity is, in the systemic logic, due to the circumstance that it lacks relevance. As an alternative to the system-immanent “critical public sphere”, Negt and Kluge develop the concept of the “proletarian public sphere”, the antagonist to the dominant bourgeois public sphere. This “bourgeois public sphere” is the ideal of bourgeois society, which I have mostly used above without an adjective and whose idea of pluralism I have described as an ideology. The differential access to the means of production necessary for the dissemination of opinion in itself makes it clear that there can be no level playing field under current capitalist conditions. The reference to capital, the ownership of the means of production and the real producers, historically the “proletariat”, is important in this context in order to understand the relationship between the bourgeois and proletarian public spheres.

It is certainly even more difficult to work with this concept of the “proletarian” today than it was 50 years ago when the book was first published. What is meant here is not the proletariat as a historical class of industrialization, but as a structural category that is fundamental to capitalist class society and which continues to exist even (or especially) under neoliberalism. Today, its members are often referred to as “wage laborers” or even more generally as “workers” in order to exclude historical misconceptions. “Wage dependent”, a term that is less apt to describe the fundamental contrast between the proletariat and capital. One side, the proletariat, are the owners of their labor power and sell it to the owners of the means of production, capital, in order to earn a living. Both classes are antagonists in capitalism. Marx’s utopia of a “free association of producers” can only be achieved by the working class that, under capitalism, produces in an externally determined manner, selling its labor power to capital, which collects the surplus value.

Negt and Kluge (1972: 10) describe the “proletarian public sphere” as one that “reflects the interests and experiences of the overwhelming majority of the population, as these experiences and interests really are”. Defined in this way, we can also use this term today. I will come back to it later in the context of concrete proposals for the organizational form of a counter-public that overcomes the limitations of the “critical public”.

For Negt and Kluge (ibid.: 143), the term “counter-public sphere” describes a “pre-form” of the proletarian public sphere. Perhaps this classification of the “pre-form” helps in

understanding the current form of the counter-public sphere, for which the following assessment is likely to apply in many cases: “A counter-public sphere that is based on ideas and discourses with enlightenment content is unable to develop effective weapons against the connection between appearance, the public sphere and public violence.” According to Negt and Kluge, it remains in the same sphere as the bourgeois, ruling public sphere. It fundamentally criticizes it and, as one might say today, leaves the realm of what can be said, taking up topics that are hardly or not at all dealt with in the mainstream. But it does not overcome the bourgeois public sphere because its critique continues to proceed from the same basic assumptions as the bourgeois public sphere (for example, the myth of pluralism), continues to address the abstract “citizen” or the “private person” and does not reorganize itself against the needs of capital.

However, critique can also be developed into a process in which it addresses a different form of practice or, better said, in which critique achieves an effective power outside the sphere of the bourgeois public sphere. This can be done if it connects with a political movement or if this emerges in the process. We will return to this in the context of a discussion on further aspects of the counter-public sphere. But let us first return to the definition. Negt and Kluge (*ibid.*: 134f.) state that bourgeois society has no interest in a substantial, living public sphere in which the real social contradictions are played out (private and economic life is excluded from the public sphere). Instead, it has a great need for a public sphere that represents a synthesis of society as a whole, society as a whole and “community”. “However, such a synthesis cannot exist in a class-based society, and it has not existed within bourgeois society up to now. Therefore, in this context, one can only speak of a pseudo-public sphere.” (*ibid.*) For the two authors, the bourgeois public sphere is ultimately only a semblance, the idea of it conceals the role of the public sphere and its actors (i.e. the leading media) in maintaining the status quo, the capitalist class society. And even back then, they were able to write: “What is remarkable about it [the illusory public sphere] is that the oppressed classes also orient themselves alongside it.”

The appearance is based on a hard material core of the prevailing conditions. However, something can be done about this: “Only counter-products of a proletarian public sphere can help against the production of the illusory public sphere: idea against idea, product against product, production context against production context. Otherwise, it remains impossible to grasp the permanent change that social violence organizes in its back and forth movements between capitalistically organized production, pseudo-public sphere and public monopoly of violence.” (*ibid.*: 143)

At the same point, the two authors give a further indication of how this can be achieved: “Only on this solid basis of real mass-experience does the proletarian public sphere have the weight with which it can bring the rushing movements of the bourgeois pseudo-public sphere to a halt.” (*ibid.*) At the same time, there is a danger that pseudo-publics will also emerge in this public sphere, as the proletarian public sphere must formulate the claim to embody the entirety of the proletarian interest, which, however, has not been developed at the beginning. To counter this problem, criticism and self-criticism remain essential. Today we are a long way from mass experiences – at least in an organized form. The aforementioned model of the Socialist Office with its fields of work would be a suitable form of organization. In its fields of work, people from the same professional environment would come together, their experiences would then be pooled and compared with the experiences from the other

fields of work. The shared practical experience could then create an idea of the whole in the overall organization (cf. Prien 2019: 58ff.). Before we return to Kluge and Negt's reflections on the self-organized public sphere, the following section will deal with further definitions of the counter-public sphere that have been formulated closer to the present, to take up at least some of the current developments in this area.

Jeffrey Wimmer (2010) refers to the term "counter-public" on three levels of complexity, the boundaries of which are, however, flowing and contingent: "Firstly, critical sub-publics are being defined in this way, who aim to make their positions, which are often perceived as marginalized and referred to as counter-publics, heard with the help of alternative media and actions within the mass media public sphere (alternative public sphere). Here again, a distinction can be made between alternative media with greater thematizing power, such as the Berlin daily newspaper taz (alternative leading media), or with less public reach, such as local community radio or open channels (alternative follow-up media). Secondly, at the (meso-)level, counter-publicity refers to collective and, above all, political learning processes within alternative organizational contexts such as new social movements or non-governmental organizations (participatory public spheres). Thirdly, at the (micro-)level of simple interaction systems, the term refers to diverse forms of (largely individual) media activism, particularly in the field of new media."

When considering the current counter-public, we see above all the first level of complexity being realized. The "participatory public sphere" lacks a real movement. Supporters of the "democracy movement" may argue that one does exist, or at least that one existed during the peak-phase of the protest movement against the coronavirus measures. Demonstrations and protests did, of course, exist as did media which together constituted the movement. However, the movement as such did not organize itself (and perhaps cannot organize itself so easily due to its heterogeneous character).

In the case of the newspaper "Demokratischer Widerstand" (Democratic resistance), for example, which constructed itself as the mouthpiece of the "movement", this led to propaganda- and perseverance-focused articles that did not reflect the real balance of power. To put it bluntly, anyone who read the newspaper was told almost weekly that the movement's victory was imminent and was served up stories of great heroic deeds and demonstrations on an unknown scale. Unfortunately, this was often unrealistic and out of touch with reality. This gave the newspaper a disillusioning character in addition to its undoubtedly organizing character. Anyone who constantly reads that they are on the winning side but never actually experiences the promised victory will turn away.

The learning- and experience-processes that Wimmer talks about can only take place in the media if they practice self-criticism and compare their wishful thinking with reality, which means having a clear view of what the underlying utopia and what the current reality is - I have called this "utopian realpolitik" in another context (Buttkereit 2011: 16f.). There are again many examples of Wimmer's third level of complexity, some of which have already been mentioned here. And the fact that the media actors of the current counter-public sphere are engaged in individual activism, i.e. that there is no organized counter-public sphere, as I will briefly outline, opposing the mainstream, is ultimately one of the reasons for this text.

Ten years ago, when Wimmer's text was published, numerous online formats had already taken over the function of the former alternative and movement-related media. The loss of significance of the alternative press thus seemed to have been overcome, he wrote. This is all

the more true today when there are offers such as KenFM that had more subscribers on YouTube in their heyday than some public broadcasting channels. Studies have shown some ten years ago: “In contrast to alternative radio stations and newspapers, online media are only a partial journalistic supplement to the mass media public sphere, as they often only articulate criticism without any alternative content.” (Wimmer 2010) For the most part, the media proved to be complementary to mass media reporting. This has not changed, even though large parts of the mass media public sphere now take place on the internet.

Christoph Spehr (2002), following in the footsteps of Negt and Kluge, argues that the development of a counter-public is less about content and more about subversive activity. Spehr describes the counter-public as a form of practice, thus placing the focus on Wimmer’s second and third level of complexity: “The counter-power of an emancipative counter-public, its capacity for subversion, lies less in the individual politically correct or incorrect images and content or in their refusal; in the last instance, it does not lie in the skillful construction of ever more sophisticated megaphones or jamming-transmitters. It lies in the idea of a potential, different combination of different desires and self-perceptions, which contains the vision of a changed collective audience (or circle of participants). In this respect, despite all the plurality of multiple publics and counter-publics, it is always about the one counter-public, which in its composition, practice and combination (of affirmed and ‘frustrated’ desires, self-conceptualization and options for action) anticipates the cooperation of a liberated society.” Spehr thus takes up the considerations of Negt and Kluge and refers to the special significance of organization, which I will come back to later, but which first need to be classified historically with regard to the development of alternative media in Germany and the “paradigm of participation”.

This brings us to the question of the extent to which the “classical” alternative media of the 1970s and 1980s differ from today’s media. Michael Meyen (2020: 263) deliberately avoids the term ‘alternative media’ “because it is firmly anchored in the history of emancipatory movements and thus almost inevitably leads to a devaluation of offers that pursue other political goals”. Media such as reitschuster.de, Tichys Einblick, Achse des Guten, Compact or Junge Freiheit, all of which criticize the narrative of the mainstream from a right-wing conservative to far-right positioning, do not fit into the classical definition of these alternative media. While the classical left-wing counter-public accuses the mainstream of being right-wing, these media criticize the mainstream for being too left-wing – whereby left-wing in this case primarily means being close to the Green Party and their clientele. The criticism is directed against identity politics and the focus on the state, which is mistaken for a left-wing position – given the weakness of the political left, this is understandable, although we cannot go into any more depth at this point

Back to the paradigm of participation that has been constitutive for alternative media to date: It is interesting to note that Marisol Sandoval (2011: 140), a student of Manfred Knoche’s, already considered the redefinition of alternative media over ten years ago. She noted that in the age of the internet, consumer participation is increasingly becoming the norm. According to her, the dominant paradigm in alternative media theory was no longer sufficient for a definition that assumed alternative media to be participatory media. The decisive factor therefore was “the democratization of media production and improvement in the living-conditions of those involved in its production”.

Sandoval (cf. *ibid.*: 142f.) formulates three objections and thus pursues the goal of

emphasizing the position of the media in the classical tradition of alternative media alongside “progressive” movements: Firstly, it is important to focus not only on the processes of production (participation) but also on the result and thus to clarify whether the content meets the demands of a critique of domination. Secondly, alternative media are not located outside of the capitalist sphere and cannot completely free themselves from economic constraints. They would therefore have to face up to the constraints of the market, firstly in order to be able to produce at all and secondly in order to be perceived. Sandoval’s third objection is that the classic definition does not allow for media that are critical of existing structures of domination and which are simultaneously professionally organized to be considered alternative media (which is particularly true of English-language publications). In view of the professionalization of some online counter-public media, the last point and the other two can certainly be applied to the current discussion.

For Sandoval (*ibid.*: 145), the “critique of domination” becomes a minimum criterion. Her definition thus ultimately ends with the understanding of alternative media as critical media, whose emancipatory potential consists of “countering the dominant content disseminated by the mass media with critical ideas and thereby promotes change in the existing material conditions”. According to Sandoval, this can only succeed with the largest possible audience, whereby participatory and non-commercial structures can be a hindrance.

She has thus returned to the concept of a critical public sphere, the limits of which Negt and Kluge have already described. In addition to the changed conditions of production and publication, which Sandoval points out and which have led to this adaptation of the definition, there is another aspect that should not be neglected: the marginalization of alternative movements. Alongside the new technical possibilities of the Internet, the movement that the alternative media stood alongside has also changed. Since the end of the 1960s, the political left has either been marginalized or integrated into the system. The second point can be illustrated with view to the media, the German newspaper taz being a particular example of this. After all, it has been aligned with the positions of those in power for many years – in particular, of course, on the side of the party Alliance 90/The Greens. The newspaper had taken a clear position during the Kosovo war in 1999 in favor of the NATO attack on Yugoslavia.

And in view of the coronavirus crisis, there is another aspect to mention: In many cases, the supposed alternative media no longer took a position critical of domination; in many cases, they affirmed the state-induced measures (cf. Gellermann 2020, further examples from the left-wing environment in Frankl/Roth/Weißert 2021: 113ff.). Instead, criticism of political domination – perhaps better: criticism of those currently in power – came from bourgeois or conservative forces such as the aforementioned Boris Reitschuster, Tichys Einblick or Achse des Guten. This does not make things any easier.

A brief attempt to explain this phenomenon, (which is already somewhat vulnerable at this stage due to a lack of further evidence), shall suffice here. The crisis of the bourgeois public sphere, from which a multitude of counter-public media emerges, is the symptom of a major social crisis that coincides with a period of fundamental change in the capitalist regime of accumulation (see Komlosy 2022). The cybernetic age is becoming more and more prevalent, and even a dependent middle-class is no longer being reached by the “mediatized center”. This provides a gateway for bourgeois-liberal or conservative criticism of government, which is ultimately not a criticism of rule, as it wants to return to old conditions.

However, the current problems have arisen on the basis of these, which is why the point of view of the critique points in the wrong direction (cf. Wetzel 2023, Frankl/Roth/Weissert 2021: 110ff., Johnstone 2023: 108ff.).

Self-organized public

In summary, it can be said at this point that the counter-public sphere has remained related to the dominant public sphere to this day. Like the bourgeois public sphere, it attempts to address the abstract citizen. It operates in the field of the public sphere, in the “arena” of opinions. At the same time, it cannot articulate the concrete needs of the people, the ruled, the wage earners, because it shares the abstraction of the bourgeois public sphere or at least does not critically question it. The media of the counter-public ultimately address the audience in the same way as the mainstream; they counter the dominant narratives with opposing positions, which ultimately restores the pluralism of opinions. To exaggerate, one could say that the counter-public sphere in its current form supports the criticized system.

After all, the counter-public is always just one opinion among many and cannot penetrate to the center, because ultimately the normative power of the factual always prevails. As soon as a medium can become dangerous to the mainstream and thus to those in power, it is no longer only fought ideologically but also economically and legally. This was demonstrated in particular by the treatment of the German podcast KenFM, but also by the attempt to deprive the Nachdenkseiten of its financial basis by revoking the non-profit status of the supporting association or the expulsion of the newsblog Boris Reitschuster from the Federal Press Conference. Of course, the fight against Russian state media following the start of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 should also be mentioned in this context in which the EU and subsequently the internet providers demonstrated the technical possibilities that underpin censorship today. At the same time, there are counter-movements against attempts to defame the counter-public. And the history of the media, and in particular the history of censorship, allows the statement “that counter-public opinion to the dominant discourse can be hindered with bans, but not stifled completely” (Hofbauer 2022: 241).

Consequences must be drawn in order to transcend the boundaries of the current and historical counter-public sphere. Some of the elements already exist in an embryonic form, while others might be borrowed from historical projects. I am talking about the self-organization of producers and consumers, which could overcome the capitalist organization of the media and transform the already existing close ties between readers and the media of the counter-public into a common organization.

In this way, the consumer-producer dichotomy and the relationship between capitalist/entrepreneur/publisher and employees can be practically eliminated, whereby the relationship between journalists and readers/listeners/viewers must be defined more precisely in the concrete design of such a cooperative/cooperative. This is because the participatory element should contribute to deepening and not to de-professionalization.

By consciously transforming the counter-public sphere into a form of public economy, the problem of abstraction from concrete needs can also be addressed in the next step. If production is no longer for an abstract market, the media cooperative no longer has to focus on this market and thus on the mainstream and its narratives. Such a transformation would be part of the “Decapitalization of the media system”, as Manfred Knoche (2014: 241) has called for and explained: “Decapitalization does not mean expropriation, but active liberation from the capitalist mode of production and commodification of media products.” The fact

that a non-commoditized media company is also subject to capitalist framework conditions can only be mentioned at this point.

In the critical literature on media, an economic transformation is brought into play in many places as an answer to the crisis of the media. Michael Meyen (2021: 152) speaks of community-owned publishers and broadcasters – “far away from the grip of a policy that links broadcasting fees to good behavior and reach, and from owners who put returns on investment above the public mandate”. Florian Zollmann (2021: 465) proposes “the development of a non-profit, independent media sector with alternative organizational and ownership structures (e.g. cooperatives, foundations or organizational forms based on self-determination)”, which would be guided by imperatives such as “equality, diversity, co-determination, collectivism and sustainability”. However, its connection to state structures must be critically questioned, because: “Why should those who are fundamentally criticized by the alternative media also provide the financial foundation for this criticism?” (Klößner 2021: 417). This discussion needs to be deepened by linking it back to the question of the public sphere.

According to what has been said so far, the mere conversion of the corporate form to a cooperative does not automatically lead to a self-organized public sphere, but the discussion about it and the deepening of the discussion of the organized – it is a learning process for all participants – can lead to a new conception of the public sphere, which would then at best be transformed into a self-organized public sphere. In the latter, the concrete needs of the organized would then also be addressed through mutual learning. If a self-organized public sphere succeeded in initiating such learning processes and developing further as a result, it would at best succeed in overcoming the basic contradiction of the bourgeois public sphere, which excludes substantial areas of life (family, business), “but nevertheless claims to represent the whole” (Negt/Kluge 1972: 11). It would then be a germinal form of what the two authors called the “proletarian public sphere”.

This is not about breaking down the private sphere, but rather about jointly determining which problems are not private but social or general in nature and therefore cannot simply be solved within the family or at work. Individuals must therefore “consciously and on their own initiative overcome their atomization and develop solidarity” (Prien 2019: 126). This makes it clear that the self-organized public sphere can only be understood as part of an organizational movement that organizes far more than just the media. Due to the other, wider understanding of “the public sphere” it already moves beyond the field of the media. With the processual development of a form of organization that serves the whole person, the boundaries of the counter-public sphere would be transcended and the process of self-organization makes it possible to move towards a “self-organized public sphere”. The discussion about this is currently in its infancy. It would be interesting but no longer feasible at this point to highlight a few historical examples and their limitations. At best, this could be done as part of the development of a self-organized public sphere. After all, taking stock of history would be an important part of productive criticism and self-criticism.

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