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Statement

Media Concentration in Today's Policy Discourse

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Address.

1.

The role of the media has always been a key issue in the democratic development of a society and will continue to be so in the future. What positive roles does the media play and what negative roles does it play? When does it foster democratic endeavours and when does it hinder them? Is the media as important as a democratically elected representative of a community or a state? Does the media merely observe politics or in fact create politics itself? Does the media constitute a fourth power next to the judiciary, legislative and executive – and should it play this role at all? What can the media contribute towards the democratic formulation of political demands and objectives? Is that really the task of the media?

The potential benefits of the media for democratic development remain an open question. In order to assess this more precisely, we would need to know far more about its effects than we actually do, even after decades of painstaking and commendable research into the influence of the media. The same applies to the other side of the picture: the question of how the media can harm a democratic community. It would also be difficult to establish individual cases of detrimental consequences caused by the direct influence of the media. An example for both of these aspects is the debate about violence in the media.

However, even though it is still difficult to make definite statements in spite of extensive research, there is certainty about the conditions under which a damaging effect of the media is *possible* and when disadvantages are *probable*. This can always be assumed as being the case when the available media is not as varied as it could be, when access to it is limited and when the media becomes dominant in the representation and formation of opinion. In other words: when media power is wielded by the few and, as Paul Sethe once said, when freedom of the press is the freedom of 20 rich people to freely say, write and broadcast their opinion.

In such cases we talk of a media concentration and of circumstances where democracy-threatening effects are to be expected. It is on this basis that media

concentration and how it can be prevented is on the agenda of any media policy that protects democracy as a whole.

2.

Until recently, manifestations of media concentration were straightforward to observe. It varied in individual countries but it was essentially the same and was always calculated as a quantitative value. I refer to the example of German regulation, namely that of radio broadcasting. The first attempt to prevent prevailing opinion from forming was the rule that a radio broadcasting company must consist of at least three partners. A majority was thus not held by any of them. Later this figure was dropped and changed in favour of the market share category, in other words the share of viewers that a television broadcasting group could target. Without going into the finer details, a figure of 30 percent was specified. This remained the same for a decade. However, the anachronistic nature of this figure was reflected when a large German press house wanted to purchase a television company. The decision-making commission had no quantitative categories and values for the share in opinion power exercised by a press organ. Therefore, they created something that they considered to be plausible and prohibited the sale. This demonstrated that no one was convinced by the system of quantitatively determining media power. The law had thus reached a limitation. How do you measure media power under cross-medial premises? To date, no one has the answer to this.

Yet barely had this case been closed when a new one arose. The 100% subsidiary of a *cable operator* purchased valuable football rights which the *cable operator* wants to offer its customers from August. But how is media power measured in such an instance of vertical integration? When the distribution, the network and the content all belong to one hand? Where does power arise here?

A third case is currently emerging. The satellite operator SES Astra wants to offer its signal only in encrypted form in the near future and charge a fee to users for the decryption. This would result in some 16 million customer datasets falling into the hands of the satellite operator. Is this a new kind of media power? The issue of access to TV signals is currently under debate - and questions of access are always questions of power.

A fourth construction is created when a DSL provider, or soon VDSL, who has always had an end-customer relationship and has always received money for this service, now also broadcasts television. Is this a trivial fact or is a new centre of power being created here? Is media power definable here as the number of accounts held with such a system or as the number of views?

There is another question that is likewise awaiting an answer. What are the implications if a content provider has possession of very valuable rights but binds the usage of these rights to conditions that only few can take advantage of, namely those that are able to spend a great deal of money in order to come into possession of such rights. What power is being created here on the part of a content provider?

What power over the formation of opinion and thus over the democracy does a telephone provider exercise if they offer pictures of violence or pornography via mobile reception or if they decide on highly selected information from politics and economics?

I could also ask: where does media power go if it is no longer exercised by the Broadcaster, by CBS and the BBC, by ITV or ARD? What needs to be regulated here in the interests of the democracy? What connection is there between the economy of communication systems and their power? Is power, as it always has been, and as it now in the case of radio broadcasting: a function of money?

3.

These are the questions that science needs to answer through analysis. It is the task of science to trace and describe the places in society where power is focused. Just as Foucault has pointed out, it is the task of science to track down the instruments with which power is created and exercised in a media-determined society, and perhaps even to find out how this power can be controlled. It is the task of science to describe new interferences between media. For example, to explain on the basis of usage behaviour data what role the Internet takes overall, what role in particular search machines play, who they have replaced as *gatekeepers* and if they are

indeed the new *gatekeepers*. It is not enough to leave this task to an empirically focused media science alone, just as this was not enough in the past.

In view of new cultural approaches, I believe that a media-based cultural science should also be involved. We need insights from the history of the media, insights that show what has remained constant and where the differences lie from the time of orality and literacy to today.

We need to reflect and find explanations for the difference between analogue and digital, as it can be assumed that analogue power is defined differently to digital power, because digital is *invisible* in comparison to analogue.

We need enlightenment about the priest castes of today who want to keep digitality a secret and derive claims from their abilities to programme and read the digital alphabet. They want to lay claim to key positions of power in the democratic society, a society that is then no longer democratic but rather a society in which surveillance is omnipresent and where the surveyors are not elected but name themselves.

The relationship between research and policymaking – to define this is one of the objectives of this conference. I belong to the group of regulators that are supposed to implement decisions made by politics and parliament. I have noticed that the old ideas mean less and less, that a tremendous change is beginning to emerge, that the digital world is being created at a high speed. Regulation cannot and need not keep pace with this speed. It does not have to react to every form of this development. It needs to watch and see where new power centres are being formed. This links it with a science which more than anything must ask the following questions: Where is power created and how does it function? Who exercises it? Where are these people? How is responsibility defined?

We are at the start of a process which Castells quite rightly referred to as a revolution, a process that is not perceived as a revolution because it has crept up on us, because it has a long latency time, which dates back to Leibniz and, as some say, to Turing – for which there are many more good reasons - to the invention of the

chip and finally to the full application of the digital alphabet consisting of zeros and ones, to the creation and transfer of communication processes.

No one can say with all certainty whether this revolution will also reduce conventional democracy to ruins or create new democratic forms of coexistence. It has never been so necessary and important for a civil future that science and politics, theory and practice, thinking and living join forces and arrive at proposals that can preserve the democratic state, and this needs to be done on a global scale. One thing is clear to me: Solutions to problems are no longer national; almost all of them need to be dealt with globally. Globalisation and digitalisation push forward by mutually driving each other, thereby creating new levels of communication and understanding. Since Gutenberg's invention of the printing press at the start of the modern era, there has never been any other point in history where so much has been at stake.