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DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA IN EUROPE

A Discursive-Material Approach

Nico Carpentier and Jeffrey Wimmer

ROUTLEDGE Focus

Democracy and Media in Europe

Democracy and Media in Europe: A Discursive-Material Approach is a theoretical reflection on the intersection of democracy and media through a constructionist lens.

This focus allows us to understand current political struggles over democracy, and over media's democratic roles, with the latter ranging from the traditional support for an informed citizenry and the watchdog role, to the organization of agonistic debate and generating fair and dignified representations of society and its many (sub)groups, to the facilitation of maximalist participation in institutionalized politics and media. Moreover, the book's reconciliation of democratic theory and media theory brings out a detailed theoretical analysis of the core characteristics of the assemblages of democracy and media, their conditions of possibility and the threats to both democracy and media's democratic roles.

This short book provides in-depth reflections on the different positions that can be taken when it comes to the performance of democracy as it intersects with the multitude of media in the 21st century. As such, the volume will be of interest to scholars of media and communication and related fields in the social sciences.

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Introduction[1]

Democracy, media and their intersections are topics that have attracted considerable attention over the past decades. The abundance of literature on these three topics even begs the question of why yet another book needs to be written about them. We argue that there are several good reasons to embark on this journey at this moment in time. One obvious reason is captured by the concept of change: The realm of democracy and the media field are hardly stable. One can—and we will—argue that contingency is a vital structuring element of the social and the political, and that change is thus simply unavoidable, even though one has to prevent falling into the traps of the myopic celebrations of novelty and the neglect of the less visible stabilizations and fixations. But the recent decades have witnessed a series of structural changes in relation to democracy and media that in many cases provide reason for concern. The intensity of these changes legitimates taking another cool-headed look at the realm of democracy, and its intersections with a series of fields[2]—in particular the media field—and to confront the older literature with the more novel theoretical reflections that have been produced in response to these changes.

A second reason is that analyses of the intersection of democracy and media are often still semi-monodisciplinary in their relationship with the 'other' academic realms, disregarding whether the analyses find their home in Political Studies or Communication and Media Studies. With this book, we aim to balance the theoretical attention in the realms of democracy and media, which is, for instance, translated into the main structure of this text, and the attention spent on outlining the core determinants of democracy and media, as well as the fluidities caused by the political struggles over the articulation of both core concepts.

Finally, a third reason to revisit the theoretical discussions on democracy and media—and their intersections—is that we want to deploy a constructionist perspective to these debates, which is still fairly rare and promisingly innovative. More particularly, we will use a discursive-material approach (see Carpentier, 2017), which allows us to pay more attention to the material(ist) component of democracy and media without neglecting the discursive component. The discursive-material approach that is used in this book builds on

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Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) discourse-theoretical approach and its cross-fertilization with new materialist approaches (as proposed by Carpentier, 2017). This results in a discursive-material approach that acknowledges that these discursive and material practices are intensely entangled (or knotted),[3] which implies that they incessantly interact. For instance, societal debates about the (desired) meaning of democracy impact the materiality of democratic practices, without one of these components necessarily becoming more important than the other. Similarly, the deeply political struggles over what media are, and should be, combine discursive(-ideological) elements with material elements, especially because of the embeddedness of the media landscape in a capitalist economy.

Democracy is thus, in a very Butlerian sense, performed, where discourses give meaning to, and structure, democratic material practices (e.g., going to vote), while these practices also deeply matter, through their ability to confirm and maintain discursive structures, but also through their capacity to dislocate and disrupt our ways of thinking about democracy. Media are a significant part of these dynamics (and many other dynamics), as they, in their multiplicity, are signifying machines that not only allow for the circulation of discourses but also for the "processes of coordination, synchronization, and harmonization" and have the "capacity for validation, legitimation, and authorization" (Carpentier, 2017: 64). These processes and capacities are also material in nature, structured through hierarchical-formalized and objective-oriented arrangements of people and objects (inside the organization), and inter-organizational networks, organizational environments and widely circulating people and objects (outside the media organization).

Even though we will not elaborate too much on the nuts and bolts of this discursive-material approach—we refer to Carpentier's (2017) *The Discursive-Material Knot* for this purpose—we do need to point out a few basic ideas. First, this discourse-theoretical starting point moves us away from the more traditional definitions of discourse-as-language and looks at the interplay of discourses-as-ideology at a societal level. This also distinguishes discourse theory from constructivist approaches that locate discursive production at the individual level. In contrast, in discourse theory, discursive production is seen as a social process, feeding on, but still transcending, individual significatory practices. Secondly, discourse theory's deep commitment to the importance of contingency is combined with a fascination with political struggle and the (potentially) resulting stabilizations and fixations. Instead of getting locked into the argument that every universal is a particular, discourse theory's interest lies in understanding how political struggles can lead to a universalization of a particular, combined with the permanent realization that no hegemony is total and eternal, and that resistance is thus not always futile.

Although Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory frequently emphasizes the importance of the material, earlier critiques (see, for an overview, Carpentier, 2017: 34ff.) make it clear that there is still a need to expand the

theoretical reflections on the ways that the discursive and the material are entangled. One metaphor to capture (and label) this entanglement is the knot, and more particularly, the discursive-material knot. When engaging in this expanding-discourse-theory project, the developments in the field of new materialism—which aims to rethink and revalidate the role of the material in cultural theory—have especially offered a solid ground, given their emphasis on material agency. This allows us to think of the discursive and the material as entangled—always interwoven, in always specific ways, always ultimately contingent, but also subjected to a series of power strategies—with power used in a very Foucauldian meaning in this book—that aim to fixate these assemblages in always specific ways. This also implies that the core dimension of the discursive and the material intersects with the dimension of structure and agency, but also with the dimension of the cognitive and the affective.

As the particularity and complexity of the discursive-material conceptual framework can be slightly intimidating for readers who are unfamiliar with it, we have exercised care not to have this conceptual framework too present, but to write in a manner that may sometimes (slightly awkwardly) be labelled as 'accessible'. At the same time, the discursive-material approach provided us with a series of sensitizing concepts—not to feed into empirical research (which is not the objective of this book), but to support the theory development elaborated in this book. For instance, notions such as the discursive, the material, political struggle, hegemony and contingency generated crucial support for the multiple iterations of literature reviews and theoretical reflection that structured the writing of this book, guiding us to the multitude of theoretical pathways and allowing us to produce a coherent narrative. The book remains a theoretical work, but its extensive use of (academic) literature aims to provide access to the much broader societal discursive-material practices and to produce a better understanding of these diverse practices.

The choice for this discursive-material approach also implies a strong sensitivity towards the normative (discursive-ideological) position that any theoretical reflection on democracy and media unavoidably takes, which also applies to this book. Here it is important to mention that this text is positioned *inside* democracy, which we see as a political project we (need to) support at its very core, even though we also have to remain critical of its many fallacies, and acknowledge the many political struggles over its articulation and performance. One of the consequences of this position is that we consider processes that would push a society outside democracy as problematic, which is why we label them 'threats'.[4] At the same time, we are also very much aware of the materiality of our position, as members of the MeDeMAP consortium—funded by the European Union's Horizon Europe research programme—who committed themselves to producing this book, as well as to providing theoretical support for the empirical work of our colleagues in the MeDeMAP consortium. Moreover, we also need to acknowledge our embeddedness in the materiality and discursivity of Europe, which structures both the focus

of this book and our academic knowledge about democracy and media. Even though we did not shy away from more global approaches, this book is still discursively and materially European.

This book tackles these issues in two main parts. We start with the theoretical discussion on democracy, where we first look at the core defining elements of democracy, without which—arguably—democracy could not be conceived (or exist). As many elements of democracy are contested, in the following section, we discuss five areas of struggle over the articulation of democracy. In the third section, we discuss what the conditions of possibility of democracy are, which refers to the discursive-material elements which are strictly speaking outside of the realm of democracy but which are very necessary as enabling forces for democracy. In Section 4, we address the threats to democracy, which captures those processes that have the ability to push political practice outside of democracy, and we conclude Part I with a (visual) summary in Section 5.

In Part II of this book, we look at the relationship between media and democracy, first outlining the core defining elements of media (in Section 6), the roles that media play in supporting and enhancing democracy (in Section 7) and the struggles over democratic media (in Section 8). Again, we then turn our attention to the conditions of possibility of democratic media (in Section 9) and the threats to media's democratic role (in Section 10). Although processes sometimes find their place in different sections—albeit in always different forms—we believe that this multifaceted approach does justice to the complexities that characterize democracy, media and their intersections.

Notes

1 This book uses, to a limited degree, text from Carpentier (2007, 2011a, 2017, 2021).
2 We use the notion of field in a Bourdieuan sense to refer to structured semi-autonomous social spaces, while the notion of realm refers to social dimensions that traverse the social (and its fields).
3 This also implies that the discursive and the material are analytical categories, necessary to show the (co-)existence of both components, but simultaneously always limited in capturing the complexities of their entanglement.
4 To remain consistent with our theoretical framework, we should clarify that these threats are still political struggles.

Part I

Democracy

1. Core Components of Democracy

Democracy is a contested and deeply ideological notion that has been defined in a wide variety of ways, even though these different democratic-ideological projects often claim to contain the one and only true—or desirable—meaning of democracy. Arguably, democracy is an empty signifier (Laclau, 1996: 36) that gains different meanings in different democratic-ideological projects, which engage in fierce discursive-material political struggles over these meanings, trying to establish a hegemonic position and fill the empty seat of the universal meaning of democracy through a particular position. Moreover, the material performances of democracy, with their multitude of always different iterations (see Derrida, 1988; Butler, 1997: 148), intersect with these discursive struggles, impacting the possible and the desirable.

This perspective also implies that democracy, as an idea and as a material practice, is inherently unstable. To use Enwezor et al.'s (2002) words: Democracy is "unrealized"; it is a horizon that is never reached but that serves a crucial purpose as ideological reference point. This also means that democracy is caught between projects that want to intensify democracy and expand it throughout different societal fields, and projects that want to limit and reduce it, or even replace it with a different model of collective problem-solving. The former projects are nicely captured by Giddens's (2002: 93) "democratizing democracy" concept, which refers to the increase of the share of decentralized decision-making. The latter projects, for instance, include authoritarian models that aim to centralize power with a particular actor, and libertarian and anarchist positions that aim to maximize individual freedom and voluntary collaboration but also—in practice often overlapping with authoritarianism—models aiming to move beyond politics through the birth of a new (wo)man who cherished communality and cooperation (as, for instance, was theorized by communism).

The impact of both types of projects is also supported by different historical-political analyses, with on the one hand, for instance, Mouffe's (2000) analysis of the democratic revolution, grounded in a *Longue Durée* approach (Braudel, 1969), where she emphasizes the intensification of

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democratic processes during democracy's existence for more than 200 years. As Mouffe (2000: 1–2) argues, this revolution

> led to the disappearance of a power that was embodied in the person of the prince and tied to a transcendental authority. A new kind of institution of the social was hereby inaugurated in which power became "an empty place".

The latter models, focussing on the disappearance (or reduction) of democracy, also find support in analytical evidence, as is illustrated by Giddens's (2002)—by now even optimistic—paradoxical observation that while democracy seems to be spreading in the world, mature democracies are experiencing a growing disaffection towards representative democratic processes (see also Raniolo, 2002). One other component of these processes is captured by Agamben's (2005) argument that we are living in a (permanent) state of exception, where civil and human rights are curtailed in the name of security. Yet another component is the rise and mainstreaming of antagonistic xenophobic, racist and ultra-nationalist ideologies in democratic states, combined with calls for strong leadership, that pave the way for populist and authoritarian regimes, for the legitimation of corruption and other forms of unethical behaviour, and for the politics of fear (see, e.g., Wodak, 2015).

These arguments about the fluidity and boundedness of democracy should not lead us into the trap of assuming that the democracy signifier can have any meaning, or can refer to anything. Democracy, as a concept, still has a set of meanings that are part of its significatory history, and that stabilize its meaning. Arguably, this implies that there is still a core set of elements that (hegemonically) fixate the meaning of democracy. Even though, theoretically, this core can also change (e.g., over time), it has proven to be remarkably stable.

One starting point is Held's (1996: 1) definition of democracy as "a form of government in which, in contradiction to monarchies and aristocracies, the people rule. Democracy entails a political community in which there is some form of political equality among the people." A similar emphasis can also be found in the etymology of the concept (with the ancient Greek 'δημοκρατία' being composed of 'δῆμος' (meaning 'the commons', 'the people') and 'κρατία' (a composite meaning 'power', 'rule')/'κράτος' (meaning 'strength', 'might', 'rule', 'authority')[1]) indicates. In his *Models of Democracy*, Held (1996: 3) initiates the debate by referring to Lively's (1975: 30) list of seven variations:

(1) all should govern;
(2) all should be involved in crucial decision-making;
(3) rulers should be accountable to the ruled;

(4) rulers should be accountable to the representatives of the ruled;
(5) rulers should be chosen by the ruled;
(6) rulers should be chosen by the representatives of the ruled and
(7) rulers should act in the interest of the ruled.

Lively's list (and Held's definition) allows the strong emphasis in democratic theory on the difference between rulers and ruled to be highlighted, but it also—and immediately—produces the necessary condition of the co-presence of representation (or the delegation of power) and participation (or the sharing of power).[2] This always-present balance between representation and participation, for instance, provides structuring support for Held's (1996) typology of democratic models. As Held describes it:

> Within the history of the clash of positions lies the struggle to determine whether democracy will mean some kind of popular power (a form of life in which citizens are engaged in *self*-government and *self*-regulation) or an aid to decision-making (a means to legitimate the decisions of those voted into power).
>
> (Held, 1996: 3—emphasis in original)

Political representation is grounded in the formal delegation of power, where specific actors are authorized by others "to sign on his [sic] behalf, to act on his behalf, to speak on his behalf" and where these actors receive "the power of a proxy" (Bourdieu, 1991: 203). Obviously, one of the basic democratic instruments for the formal delegation of power is elections, where, through the organization of a popular vote, political actors are legitimized to gain (at least partial) control over well-defined parts of the state's resources and decision-making structures. This control is not total but structured through institutional, legal (often constitutional) and cultural logics.

On the other side of the democratic balance is the notion of participation, which refers to the involvement of the citizenry within (institutionalized) politics, ranging from voting in elections to political activism. As Marshall (1992: 10–11) explains in his discussion of political citizen rights, this not only includes the right to elect but also the right to stand for election: "By the political element [of citizenship] I mean the right to participate in the exercise of political power, as a member of a body invested with political power or as an elector of such a body." Again, these forms of participation are not all-encompassing, but limited, as they are structured through institutional, legal and cultural logics (see Dahlgren, 2009). One important example is the limits imposed by the concept of citizenship itself, which is not only a democracy-facilitating concept, but also has an exclusionary component.

Even though the exact balance between representation and participation can be located in many different ways, contemporary Western democracies

tend to privilege representational democracy, or government by the "representatives of the people and not by the people themselves," with these representatives selected through elections (Mezey, 2008: 2). Mezey (2008: 2) reminds us that "in popular discourse terms such as republic, democracy, and representative democracy are used interchangeably, in fact they mean quite different things." Representative democracy (or indirect democracy) is often juxtaposed to direct democracy, but in practice, elements of direct democracy—for instance, referendums, citizen agenda initiatives and recall processes (Mezey, 2008: 182), to name but a few—have often been integrated into representative democracy. Still, representative democracy, with the parliament as its icon, remains a hegemonic component of contemporary Western democracies.

A second necessary component of democracy's definition is the presence of a political community. If we return to Lively's (1975: 30) list, with its emphasis on rulers and ruled, we already find a first indication of the central role of the political community. Bass (2005: 638) formulates this significance more explicitly: "The foundational essence of democracy consists of a political community in which there is some form of political equality among its members." Even though political communities are constructed—see Anderson's (2006: 6) concept of the imagined communities, which are "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign"—these communities demarcate and discipline the frontiers of democratic practice, articulating who the ruled are, and who their rulers can be.

One of the key discussions about the role of the political community is the link between this political community and the state, in a democratic context. Linz and Stepan (1996: 17) take a clear position in this debate, when they write: "Democracy is a form of governance of a modern state. Thus, without a state, no modern democracy is possible." Even though this position has been contested—in part because it tends to reduce democracy to its narrower version, which sees democracy as 'mere' politics (see below)—this discussion again demonstrates the importance of the political community in defining democracy. Elkins and Sides (cited in Møller and Skaaning, 2011: 88), using a statist discourse, formulate this argument as follows:

> The issue is one of consent. While democracy requires that citizens accept the legitimacy of the elected leaders and rules that put them there, it also requires, more fundamentally, that citizens respect the prerogatives and boundaries of the state that these leaders govern.

Moreover, Linz and Stepan's work, in its focus on stateness, adds an important component, which is again about the delimitation of the state (and of the political community). Linz and Stepan here refer to Dahl's (1989: 207—emphasis removed) position:

> The criteria of the democratic process presuppose the rightfulness of the unit itself. If the unit itself is not proper or rightful—if its scope or domain is not justifiable—then it cannot be made rightful simply by democratic procedures.

This statement not only refers to the legitimacy of the political community but also (as we shall see later) to the inclusionary and exclusionary mechanisms of citizenship itself. Here the question becomes: "Who defines citizenship, and how?" (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 28). The answer provided by Linz and Stepan (1996: 28) again emphasizes the role of the state:

> there can be no complex modern democracy without voting, no voting without citizenship, and no official membership in the community of citizens without a state to certify membership.

What we consider the last necessary component of democracy's definition is—similarly to stateness—debated as well. Over time, in most Western contexts, democracy has been articulated with liberalism, constituting what is called liberal democracy. At least some elements of liberal democracy have been hegemonized, which implies that they have now become part of the core defining elements of democracy itself. More specifically, as Bass (2005: 638) writes: "Only when democratic principles were combined with liberalism were civil rights first considered to be essential to democracy." In more elaborate versions, these citizen rights include political rights (as already mentioned above), but also civic rights and social rights (see, again, Marshall, 1992).

A less formal interpretation of this list allows us to emphasize the organized nature of the political community. The political weight of non-state political actors in political life has particularly been emphasized by (neo-) pluralist democratic theorists (see, e.g., Dahl, 1961), in their focus on interest or pressure groups, acknowledging that civil society (but also industry-related groups) plays an active political role. The democratic importance of this organized nature of the political community has also been argued, for instance, in Putnam's (1993) work on civil society. Here, the structures provided by civil society are considered indispensable for democracy, as they allow citizens to meet and discuss, but also to mobilize and act politically, and to learn and become acquainted with the complexities of (democratic) organizational decision-making.

A more formal interpretation of the list brings us to another key defining (sub)element of democracy, which is the rule of law, or the idea that all citizens and institutions, including rulers, are accountable to the same laws (see Ten, 2009). For instance, Bass's definition of liberal democracy gives a prominent role to the rule of law, articulating liberal democracy as a "political system marked not only by free and fair elections, but also by the rule of law and the protection of basic civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, assembly,

and religion" (Bass, 2005: 637). Even though other versions of democracy are possible, the hegemonization of (parts of) liberal democracy has transformed the rule of law, together with the presence of more specific citizen (political) rights, into key defining (sub)characteristics of democracy.

2. Struggles over Democracy

As was already argued in the previous section, the (meaning of the) concept of democracy is the object of a series of political struggles that aim to dislocate, disrupt or replace democracy. Sometimes these struggles also aim to re-articulate democracy. While the projects of this first type are counter-democratic—and reject the political practice of democracy as a whole by rejecting its core defining elements—projects of the second type accept the basic principles of democracy but defend particular forms of democratic practice.

The first type is, in itself, quite diverse, clustering together authoritarian, libertarian, anarchist and communist positions (amongst others). For instance, libertarian ideology sees the collective decision-making of democracy (and the often-privileged role of the state) as a threat to individual freedoms and to the ability to engage in voluntary social relations, while also seeking to preserve (and expand) capitalist economic relations (for an example, see Karsten and Beckman, 2012).[3] Authoritarian positions, in contrast, with their focus on strong leadership, aim to remove the participatory component from democracy. Finally, some democratic reform projects are still close to these counter-democratic positions, as they contest one or more core elements of democracy. One example is Brennan's (2016) quite recent defence of epistocracy, which can be seen as a (slightly more complex) form of noocracy, or the rule by wise people. As our analysis is still grounded in an acceptance (and appreciation) of democracy, these more fundamental contestations will be articulated as threats to democracy and are discussed later, in Section 3.

The second type, with its contestations *within* democracy, will be addressed here, as these contestations are an intrinsic part of the democratic process itself (see Figure 1.1). Drawing this frontier is not always easy, and it is part of the democratic process itself, as, for instance, Mouffe (2005: 14) indicates: "What democracy requires is drawing the we/they distinction in a way which is compatible with the recognition of the pluralism which is constitutive of modern democracy." Building on this paradox is Mouffe's argument that conflict is an intrinsic part of democracy, also when it concerns the articulation of democracy itself, limited by the unacceptability of violence. In *On the Political*, Mouffe (2005) approvingly cites Canetti (1960: 222) who has written that democracy is the "renunciation of death as an instrument of decision." Within the frontiers constituted by the core defining elements of democracy, "necessary for maintaining popular rule over time" (Gutmann, 2007: 528), there is still ample space for internal contestation, which will be discussed in this section.

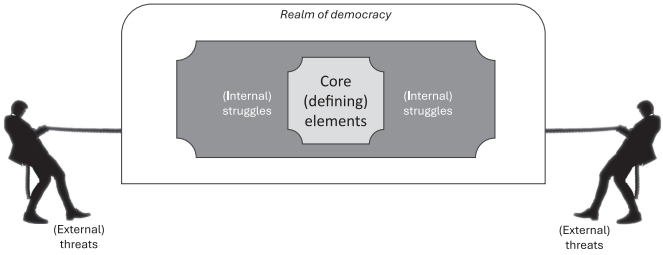

Figure 1.1 (Partial) structure of the model with core elements, struggles and threats to democracy[4]

Before mapping the most important areas of political struggle over democracy, it is important to return to the intrinsic interwovenness of the discourse of democracy and its material practices. The discussion of democratic struggles over democracy in the following subsections thus needs to be read as an analysis of entangled discursive-material democratic practices, always susceptible to change, but also subject to hegemonizing forces that aim to fixate this contingency.

2.1. The Balance between Participation and Representation

While democracy is defined by the presence of both representation and participation, the exact nature of the balance between these two components is one of the core political struggles in democratic history. When the field of institutionalized politics is discursively articulated—following, for instance, Schumpeter (1976)—as the privilege of specific competing elites operating at the political-institutional level, the balance shifts towards representation and the delegation of power. This implies that the political role of the citizenry becomes materially reduced to participation in the election of those elite actors, a situation that is legitimated through the knowledge, skills and commitment of elite actors. In contrast, in other democratic models (e.g., participatory-democratic models—see below), participation plays a more substantial and continuous role. Here, participation does not remain materially restricted to the 'mere' election of institutional representatives. In these democratic models, democracy is defined through more decentralized forms of societal decision-making. Carpentier (2011a) refers in this context to the minimalist versus maximalist dimension of democratic participation, where representation and participation are always present but have different weights, as is visualized in Figure 1.2.

Some (maximalist-)democratic models[5] contest the dominance of representative democracy, and thus show the workings of this political struggle

Minimalist democratic participation	*Maximalist democratic participation*
Focussing on representation and delegation of power	Balancing representation and participation
Participation limited to elite selection	Attempting to maximize participation
Focussing on macro-participation	Combining macro- and micro-participation
Narrow definition of politics as institutionalized politics	Broad definition of the political as a dimension of the social

Figure 1.2 The minimalist versus maximalist dimension of democratic participation.
Source: Selection from Carpentier, 2011b: 17

over the balance between representation and participation, as they propose to reform representative democracy in order to increase and even maximize the participatory component of democracy. For instance, Marxist theory takes a strong emancipatory position, that is embedded in a critique of the bourgeois domination of society. In particular, Marxism's transitional stage, with the emphasis on delegative democracy, demonstrates the interest in (first) reforming democracy, and establishing what Marx calls the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat. The political structures of the Commune of Paris function as an example, as it was formed by municipal councillors,

> chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.
>
> (Marx, 1993: 57)

A (relatively) more recent example is the New Left conceptualizations of participatory democracy, developed by Pateman (1970, 1985) and Macpherson (1966, 1973, 1977), and later by Mansbridge (1980) and Barber (1984), who focus on the combination of the principles and practices of direct and representative democracy. The problems of coordination in large-scale industrial societies bring these authors to accept representation (and power delegation) as a necessary tool at the level of national decision-making, but at the same time Pateman (1970: 1) critiques authors such as Schumpeter (1976) for attributing "the most minimal role" to participation, and for basing their arguments on a fear that the implementation of more extensive forms of participation might jeopardize society's stability. It is only through participation in these 'alternative areas' of the political that a citizen can "hope to have any real control over the course of his [sic] life or the development of the environment in which he lives" (Pateman, 1970: 110).

In contrast, Schumpeter's (1976) model of competitive-elitist democracy is an example of the minimalist participatory approach to democracy. In the 1940s, Schumpeter (1976: 269) defines democracy as an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote." Competitive-elitist democracy places a strong emphasis on political leadership and—as the name of the model indicates—sees the competition between political elites as a safeguard against the excesses of political leadership, while simultaneously handling the (perceived) problem of an electorate which is considered to be poorly informed or too emotional.

2.2. The Reach of Democracy: Politics versus the Political

A second political struggle is related to the reach of democracy. The issue is whether democracy is confined to the field of institutionalized politics, whether democracy functions in all fields of the social or whether particular fields (e.g., the economy) are excluded from democratic practice. A helpful distinction to theorize this struggle is the difference between politics and the political, as described by Mouffe in the following terms:

> By "the political," I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations, antagonism that can take many forms and emerge in different types of social relations. "Politics" on the other side, indicates the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of "the political".
>
> (Mouffe, 2000: 101, see also Mouffe, 2005: 8)

In other words, according to Mouffe (1993a: 3), the political

> cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition.

This formulation of Mouffe's distinction confusingly diverges from a series of (structurally similar) arguments that maintain the usage of the signifier 'politics', while broadening its meaning.[6] Despite these differences, we still find in these intellectual projects the tendency to discursively expand the concept of politics beyond the confinements of institutionalized politics, which supports the performance of democratic practices beyond this particular field.

These attempts to broaden democracy's reach (and the resistances they provoke) are connected to issues of scale and captured by the distinction that Thomas (1994) makes between micro- and macro-participation. While macro-participation relates to participation in the entire polis, country or political community, micro-participation refers to the fields of school, family, workplace, church and local community. The positions that defend a narrower definition of democracy then become translated into approaches to participation that centralize institutionalized politics. For instance, a classic definition of political participation, by Verba and Nie (1987: 2), states that political participation is "those activities by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take," which mostly situates political participation within the field of macro-participation. Brady (1997: 737) uses a slightly broader definition of political participation as "any activity of ordinary citizens with the aim of influencing the political outcomes," but on the next page adds that these participatory efforts are "directed at some government policy or activity" (Brady, 1997: 738). More traditional public sphere models also tend to focus on macro-communicative processes in the establishment of 'the' public opinion. This is a viewpoint echoed in Habermas's (1974: 49) old definition of the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed."

In contrast, positions that defend a broader approach to democracy argue against the idea that citizen involvement is restricted to institutionalized politics, despite the state's hegemonic position. Democratic (participatory) practices can also be embedded within the structures of everyday life (which can, for instance, be located in civil society, businesses or families). One example is *The Transformation of Intimacy*, where Giddens (1992: 182) formulates a warm plea for the "radical democratisation of the personal" on the basis of the argument that a symmetry exists between "the democratising of personal life and democratic possibilities in the global political order at the most extensive level" (Giddens, 1992: 195–196). A similar argument is used by Hartmann et al. (2007) when developing the notion of democratic familyship. Another example of a project to broaden the reach of democracy is Pateman's (1970) work. Although she accepts the importance of representative democracies, she combines this with attention to participatory processes in other societal fields, such as the workplace:

> Apart from its importance as an educative device, participation in the workplace – a political system – can be regarded as political participation in its own right. Thus industry and other spheres provide alternative areas where the individual can participate in decision making in matters of which he [or she] has first hand, everyday experience.
>
> (Pateman, 1970: 35)

2.3. The Reach of Democracy 2: Procedural versus Substantive Democracy

A third political struggle also relates to the reach of democracy but focusses on whether democracy should be confined to its procedural component, or whether it should also have a substantive component. In other words, it is the struggle between "rule-centered and outcome-centered conceptions of democracy" (Shapiro, 1996: 123). In the case of procedural democracy, sometimes also called proceduralist democracy or proceduralism, an outcome is "acceptable as long as the relevant procedure generates it." Bobbio's (1987: 24—emphasis in original) definition of democracy is illustrative of this approach, when he writes that democracy is "characterized by a set of rules (primary or basic) which establish *who* is authorised to take collective decisions and which *procedures* are to be applied."

Saffon and Urbinati (2013: 442) make the link between the discursive articulation of procedural democracy and the material practice of elections particularly explicit when they write that the proceduralist view

> posits that the modern democratic procedure—based on every individual's equal participation in fair and competitive elections for selecting political representatives and thereby contributing to the production of decisions via majority rule—is the best way of respecting equal liberty in a context of pluralism and dissent.

The emphasis on 'equal liberty' has been part of the procedural democracy tradition for a considerable time, with, for instance, Kelsen (2013: 97)—writing in the 1920s—defending formal equality as part of political participation, but also rejecting any substantive interpretation of equality:

> Insofar as the idea of equality is meant to connote anything other than formal equality with regard to freedom (i.e., political participation), that idea has nothing to do with democracy. This can be seen most clearly in the fact that not the political and formal, but the material and economic equality of all can be realized just as well—if not better—in an autocratic-dictatorial form of state as it can in a democratic form of state.

Kelsen (2013: 32) makes a similar argument against the articulation of liberalism with democracy:

> The meaning of freedom has changed from the idea that the individual should be free from state rule to the idea that he should be able to participate in that rule. This transformation simultaneously requires that we detach democracy from liberalism. Since the demand for democracy is satisfied insofar as those subject to the order participate in its creation, the

democratic ideal becomes independent of the extent to which that order seizes upon them and interferes with their "freedom".

In the substantive democracy approach, as mentioned before, the notion of outcome is centred. In this approach, a "[re]distributive outcome or state of affairs (equality, lack of certain types or degrees of inequality, or some other)" (Shapiro, 1996: 123) is articulated, which is then used to evaluate the results of the decision rules.[7] Shapiro's statement already indicates the variety of possible outcomes to be articulated with democracy. In the broadest versions, we find democracy becoming articulated with a range of (universalized) value-discourses,[8] including peace (and resistance against war and violence), freedom (and resistance against human rights violations), equality (and resistance against discrimination), dignity (and resistance against dehumanization and instrumentalization) and justice (and resistance against oppression and social inequality). In more restricted variations, we can, for instance, find a sensitivity to the interests of those represented, where "representing here means acting in the interest of the represented" (Pitkin, 1967: 209). In-between positions are Fetrati's (2023: 379) argument that substantive democracy has participatory, deliberative and egalitarian dimensions and Doomen's (2016: 279) argument that "Democracy is associated with certain (human) rights … a moral conception of democracy."

Substantive democracy approaches also reopen the discussion on the frontiers of democracy, as a purely proceduralist approach to democracy might be used to end democracy or to violate the rights of a minority (Doomen, 2016: 282–283), which resonates with Popper's (1947) paradox of tolerance (see later).

2.4. Defining the Political Community: Group-Differentiated Rights, and Individualistic versus Communal Democracy

A fourth area of political struggle over democracy focusses on the discursive articulation (and delimitation) of the political community. Although the presence of a political community is a defining element of democracy, the discursive-material frontier that is drawn between members of the political community who are allowed to participate in the political process, and those who are excluded from this participation, is also a political decision and thus object of contestation. Given the strong articulation of democracy with stateness (see Linz and Stepan, 1996), citizenship becomes a crucial mechanism for inclusion or exclusion, even though it is not the only one, as the broad approach to politics (captured by the concept of the political, see above) allows for the definition of other social entities, such as the family, the pupils at a school, the students at a university or polytechnic, or the employees at a workplace, as political communities too, which have their own (contested) inclusions and exclusions.

Still, citizenship has become one of the key discursive locations of the struggles over (legitimate) membership of political communities, intimately connected with political debates about nationalism—with its desire to articulate the nation and the state, but also with its struggles over the nature of the nation as a political community (see Anderson, 2006). Furthermore, this struggle over homogeneity and heterogeneity (and their balance) intersects with the acknowledgement (or not) of (cultural) diversity, multiculturalism and migrant rights. In other words, the different subcommunities of a political community may be considered vital components of democracy. Bass (2005: 639) summarizes these debates within liberal democracy as follows:

> Liberal democratic theorists since World War II have traditionally tended to argue that democratic freedom and equality can best be ensured through the provision of individual political rights and civil liberties. But recently some theorists have resurrected a tradition of liberal democratic thought that argues that for freedom and equality to prosper in multinational (or even multicultural) societies, it is necessary to also require some group-differentiated or minority rights.

One example of the argument for group-differentiated (or minority) rights is Kymlicka's (1995: 2) *Multicultural Citizenship*, where the scene is set in the following terms:

> Some minorities were physically eliminated, either by mass expulsion (what we now call "ethnic cleansing") or by genocide. Other minorities were coercively assimilated, forced to adopt the language, religion, and customs of the majority. In yet other cases, minorities were treated as resident aliens, subjected to physical segregation and economic discrimination, and denied political rights.

This approach, to "supplement traditional human rights principles with a theory of minority rights" (Kymlicka, 1995: 5), while avoiding the risks of generating new exclusions and segregations that violate human rights (Kymlicka, 1995: 6) and the threats to social unity (Kymlicka, 1995: 192), is defended as a model to better "address the needs and aspirations of ethnic and national minorities" (Kymlicka, 1995: 195).

This conflict over the nature of the political community also finds its translation in the debates about what Elazar (1993) calls individualistic and communal democracy. Individualistic democracy—which Elazar (1993: 13) equates to liberal democracy—sees "the individual standing naked in the world until he or she binds with other individuals to establish civil society and government." This type of democracy aligns with what Hendriks (2011) calls aggregative democracy, where individual preferences are registered and aggregated, which, in turn, is associated with majoritarian democracy. Bass

(2005: 637) describes the latter form of democracy as a "form of democracy in which political power tends to be centralized and concentrated so as to reflect the will of the majority, or even a bare plurality."

In contrast, communal democracy moves away from the dominant individualistic models of democracy, and acknowledges the political relevance of different subcommunities in the political community. Or, in Elazar's (1993: 16) words: "The theory of communal democracy gives the community a political status in its own right." In (an extended version of) communal democracy, we can argue that there are many different types of communities that can become acknowledged, for instance, ethnic, linguistic or religious communities, but also corporations, with the latter bringing in corporatist models (see, e.g., McRae, 1979). In particular, the democratic practices in, and research on, so-called 'divided societies' produce a diversity of communal democratic models, including consociational democracy (Lijphart, 1969), integrative democracy (Horowitz, 1985) or centripetalism, and communalism (Reilly, 2011).[9] Federalism can also be seen as a formal translation of the model of communal democracy.

If we focus, for convenience's sake, on one of these models, namely consociational democracy, we can show the workings of communal democracy and its political struggle with individualistic democracy. After all, as Lijphart (1969: 214) writes: "Consociational democracy violates the principle of majority rule." Older definitions of consociational democracy, such as Lijphart's (1969: 216), focus on "government by elite cartel designed to turn a democracy with a fragmented political culture into a stable democracy," but this was soon expanded through the generation of the four 'classic' principles of consociationalism, which are:

> (1) government by grand coalition, (2) mutual veto on the part of the coexisting groups, (3) proportionality as the principal standard of political representation, civil service appointment, and allocation of public resources, and (4) a high degree of segmental autonomy in those areas where joint decision making is not needed.
>
> (Taylor, 2009: 123, see also Lijphart, 1977: 25–44, and Bogaards et al., 2019: 346)

Consociationalist models have, in many cases, failed in their implementation or survival, with Belgium and Switzerland considered to be the classic and still existing cases (Taylor, 2009: 6). Lemarchand (2006: 2) argues that in particular Africa "has become a graveyard of consociational experiments," but also the case of the Republic of Cyprus can be mentioned here, as consociationalism lasted on this island for exactly three years (Lijphart, 1969: 216; Taylor, 2009: 6). In the Cypriot case, the majoritarian articulation of democracy that Greek Cypriots were using led to a "theorisation of Turkish-Cypriots *not* as a political representational group but as a 'minority'" (Anthias

and Ayres, 1983: 69—emphasis in original), which resulted in the violent collapse of Cypriot consociational democracy in 1963. These histories show the strength of majoritarian articulations of democracy, but also remind us of the existence and intensity of political struggles over the definition of the political community.

2.5. The Struggle over Procedures: Majoritarian Democracy versus Consensus Democracy, and the Shift beyond Elections

The last political struggle *within* democracy over democracy is more (but not exclusively) material, as it is focussed on the nature of the democratic procedures. How exactly the 'rule of the people' is organized can vary in numerous ways, and is, in itself, an object of political struggle. If we look at current forms of (macro-)democratic organization, for instance, through Lijphart's (2012) study of 36 countries, this multitude of organizational models becomes apparent. Lijphart (2012) distinguishes between two-party and multi-party models, single-chamber and multi-chamber parliamentary models, different electoral systems, different models of organizing the executive power and the relations between the legislative and executive powers, different positions of the judicial system and the constitution, different positions of interest groups, and different positions of central banks.

At the same time, Lijphart (2012) argues that this multiplicity is structured through the majoritarian versus consensus democracy dimension. He introduces this distinction through the fundamental question: "Who will do the governing and to whose interests should the government be responsive when the people are in disagreement and have divergent preferences?" (Lijphart, 2012: 2), which has two answers. The answer "the majority of the people" leads to majoritarian democracy, while the answer "as many people as possible" leads to consensus democracy. There are a few important additions to make here. First, both models—as defined by Lijphart—focus on the formal organization of democratic structures. Second, consensus democracy, as Lijphart (2012: 2—emphasis in original) writes,

> does not differ from the majoritarian model in accepting that majority rule is better than minority rule, but it accepts majority rule only as a *minimum* requirement: instead of being satisfied with narrow decision-making majorities, it seeks to maximize the size of these majorities.

But again, whether majoritarian or consensus democracy is used, is the object of political struggle, keeping in mind that majoritarianism

> is simple and straightforward and has great appeal because government by the majority and in accordance with the majority's wishes obviously

> comes closer to the democratic ideal of "government by and for the people" than government by and responsive to a minority.
>
> (Lijphart, 2012: 2)

The political struggles over the formal organization of democracy are not limited to the current diversity of democratic practices. Some perspectives on formal democracy and its procedures propose alternative (or even counter-hegemonic) practices, that present novel democratic procedures or that aim to revalidate older procedures that have fallen into disuse. One example here is Van Reybrouck's (2016) *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy*, where he—building on the earlier work of Bouricius (2013)—passionately defends sortition as an alternative to election, or as a democratic practice that can be combined with election. Returning to Athenian democracy, but also pointing to the current practices of people's juries in the criminal justice system—and one can also add advisory citizen parliaments (e.g., Farrell et al., 2019) to this list—Van Reybrouck (and Bouricius) defend multi-body sortition, also as a (partial) solution for "the systemic crisis of democracy," which

> can be remedied by giving sortition a fresh chance. The drawing of lots is not a miracle cure, not a perfect recipe, any more than elections ever were, but it can correct a number of the faults in the current system. Drawing lots is not irrational, it is arational, a consciously neutral procedure whereby political opportunities can be distributed fairly and discord avoided. The risk of corruption reduces, election fever abates and attention to the common good increases. Citizens chosen by lot may not have the expertise of professional politicians, but they add something vital to the process: freedom. After all, they don't need to be elected or re-elected.
>
> (Van Reybrouck, 2016: 151–152)

3. Conditions of Possibility of Democracy

Democracy, as a discursive-material assemblage, is enabled by a series of processes that are located outside democracy itself, but that are still conducive to its existence. Even though they are sometimes called preconditions, we prefer to use the term conditions of possibility here (see Figure 1.3). Our usage of this term is inspired by Kant's reflection on the conditions of possibility of cognition and experience[10] (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*), where he succinctly defines this notion as the conditions that are "given a priori" (Kant, 2016, KrV, Section 18).

In his reflection on Kant's notion of the condition of possibility, Deleuze (2015: 31) argues that—what he calls—the *ground* has three characteristics in Kant's work: "conditioning, localization, and limitation." The first characteristic reiterates the core idea of the condition of possibility concept—"The condition is that which renders possible" (Deleuze, 2015: 31) or "The ground

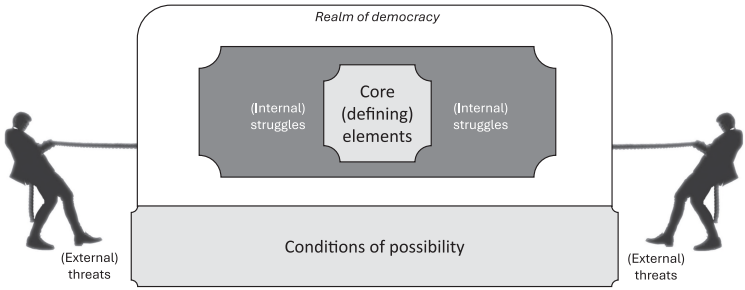

Figure 1.3 Structure of the model of the realm of democracy with core elements, struggles, conditions of possibility and threats to democracy

grounds by rendering possible" (Deleuze, 2015: 33)—while localization refers to the capacity of the ground to pose "what it grounds in a given, in a milieu" (Deleuze, 2015: 34). Conditions of possibility thus contextualize or situate particular processes, rendering them specific. Finally, according to Deleuze's reading of Kant, the ground limits. It produces "foundations beyond which it cannot go" (Deleuze, 2015: 36).

Deleuze's reading of the ground (in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*) provides support for the idea that the conditions of possibility of democracy are different from the democratic assemblage, but that they are simultaneously interacting with it. The conditions of possibility of democracy are thus not to be seen as 'pure', 'original' or determining outsides, but as enabling assemblages, whose fluid existence remains nevertheless necessary for the democratic assemblage to exist. As we shall see in the discussion below, some of democracy's conditions of possibility are located at a more discursive level, while others are more material (even though we also see here that these two components are entangled).

3.1. Material Decentralizations and Stabilities

In the historical literature on the formation of modern democracy, one of the arguments is that democracy was enabled by changing material class structures, with, for instance, the monarchy or the aristocracy sufficiently weakened, or the inability to create a strong aristocratic-bourgeois coalition. One example is Moore's (1973: 437) analysis,[11] who writes that "a commercial and industrial class which is too weak and dependent" may throw

> itself into the arms of the landed aristocracy and the royal bureaucracy, exchanging the right to rule for the right to make money … Where the

coalition succeeds in establishing itself, there has followed a prolonged period of conservative and even authoritarian government.

In this type of argument, democracy requires the absence of structural power imbalances between classes or societal groups, and the absence of fundamental imbalances in the distribution of capital, as this disrupts the very basis on which democracy rests, namely (a degree of) structural equality in society.

If we go back further in time, we can also identify a second type of argument related to material conditions, adding the element of time to the equation. For instance, when analysing Athenian democracy, Held (1996: 23–24) points to the deeply problematic—from a contemporary perspective—material conditions that enabled that particular form of democracy, namely the existence of a slave economy that allowed the Athenian citizens to invest in political decision-making, where "Athenian slavery and democracy seem to have been indivisible." Or, in other words: "The legendary democracy was intimately connected to what one might call the 'tyranny of citizens'" (Held, 1996: 24). Secondly, the dislocations that disrupted Athenian democracy, and which were (at least to a high degree) caused by elements external to the democratic process, also point to the importance of stability. One of many examples here is the defeat of Athens that was inflicted by Sparta in the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), which resulted in the establishment of a group of pro-Spartan oligarchs in Athens, known as the Thirty Tyrants.

These arguments about material stability also connect to another period in time, namely the rise of fascism and Nazism in 20th-century Europe and the collapse of several democratic regimes in Europe (see, for instance, Berman, 2021). Here, the instabilities caused by the dislocation of the First World War, with its economic hardships, social unrest and "the need of dramatic national self-assertion" in the defeated countries (Gilbert, 2002: 32), in combination with the Great Depression (1929–1939), structurally contributed to this collapse. The material stability arguments also resonate with more contemporary analyses about the role of—what, for instance, Turner (2022) calls—catastrophes, in the weakening and destabilizing of democracy. In particular, Turner (2022: 8) refers to a "general political and social crisis" and to "multiple difficulties" which "have been important in the rise of right-wing populism, and the further destabilization of democratic institutions."

3.2. The State and Its Legitimacy

A second condition of possibility is connected to the presence of core actors in the democratic process, as part of the political community. As we argued before, in contemporary democratic practice—although it is not a theoretical necessity—the state has become the structure in which and through which democracy is organized. The state is, as Gupta (1995: 392) writes, "a cohesive and unitary whole," with boundaries that are "defined by all those actions

more or less directly related to the making of binding decisions for society" (Easton, 1957: 385); but the state is still also a "multi-layered concept that includes a range of ideological, material and judiciary relations" (Filimonov and Carpentier, 2023: 168, see also Fuchs, 2018: 72). This also implies that the state cannot be equated with democracy, including in democratic societies.

In particular, neo-pluralist democratic theorists (e.g., Lowi, 1969) emphasize this point. As mentioned before, the neo-pluralist perspective highlights the role of different groups, where the state and its bureaucracies become (only) one of the actors in the power play over political decision-making. Simultaneously, neo-pluralists argue that corporate actors have a substantial power base and enjoy a privileged position, which also affects the position of the state. What Offe (1984: 49) calls the capitalist state "protects the capital relation from the social conditions it produces without being able to alter the status of this relationship as the dominant relationship." Or, as Held (1996: 223—emphasis in original) points out: "The modern state, therefore, faces contradictory imperatives: it must maintain the accumulation process without undermining either *private* accumulation or the belief in the market as a fair distributor of scarce resources."

One crucial component then becomes the legitimacy of the state and the acceptance of the decisions of its entities, to be articulated as democratic, to then feed into the rule of law. Earlier, we already referred to Dahl's (1989: 207—emphasis removed) analysis, which is worth repeating, as it incorporates a clear formulation of legitimacy as a condition of possibility: "The criteria of the democratic process presuppose the rightfulness of the unit itself. If the unit itself is not proper or rightful—if its scope or domain is not justifiable—then it cannot be made rightful simply by democratic procedures." Or, as Ananieva and Rozhkova (2021: 32) write: "In the modern world, legitimacy has become a necessary, i.e. required, condition of a well-ordered state regarding its political institutions and their decisions." There are many different approaches to (political) legitimacy, but in particular, Chabot's (1993: 160) work is helpful, as he distinguishes four dimensions (democratic, ideological, technocratic and ontological), and proposes a general definition of legitimacy as "the adequacy of the real or perceived qualities of the rulers to the implied or clearly expressed consent of the governed."

3.3. The People and Their Access, Interaction, Engagement, Trust and Knowledge

Of course, the state is not the only relevant actor in the political community, despite its privileged status. Equally important are the people as constituent of the political community. Even though there are some very basic material needs that most likely need to be fulfilled as well—e.g., having the primary needs of nutrition, shelter, protection, etc., met—it is, in particular, the conditions of possibility related to participation that become relevant here, as

democracy is expected to provide a degree of participation. Wacquant's summary of Bourdieu's work—for instance, elaborated in *Pascalian Meditations* (Bourdieu, 1997)—offers a good introduction to this cluster of conditions of possibility, arguing that it is necessary:

> first to acknowledge that the conditions of access to political expression are not universally granted a priori to all but, on the contrary, that they are socially determined and differentially allocated; and then to work to universalize the ability and the propensity to act and think politically, that is, to universalize realistic means of gaining access to that particular historical embodiment of the universal that is democratic politics.
>
> (Wacquant, 2004: 12)

One model that includes two conditions of possibility is the so-called AIP model by Carpentier (2011a, 2011b), where AIP stands for access, interaction and participation. The first condition of possibility, access, refers to presence, for instance, in using media technologies to have one's voice heard, or in particular organizational settings where (co-)decision-making processes are organized. The second condition of possibility, interaction, then refers to the "establishment of socio-communicative relationships" (Carpentier, 2011b: 127), necessary for participatory processes to take place, for instance, through the usage of media technologies or with other citizens in (the set-up of) (co-) decision-making processes.

Another body of literature that refers to the conditions of possibility of participation and democracy focusses on the notion of engagement. Wacquant (2004: 3) refers to engagement as the "social state wherein everyone would possess both the inclination and the ability to take matters political into their own hands," while Dahlgren (2013: 25) defines engagement as the "subjective disposition that motivates [the] realization [of participation]," in order to distinguish it from participation. Dahlgren and Hill (2023: 5), when discussing media engagement, define the latter concept as an "energising internal force that propels citizens to participate in society." In earlier work, Dahlgren (2009) argues that the feeling of being invited, committed, and/or empowered and also the positive inclination towards the political (and the social) are crucial components of engagement.

Trust is yet another condition of possibility for democracy that is frequently mentioned. Dahlgren (2013: 24), for instance, writes that "A minimal level of 'horizontal' trust, that is, between citizens, is necessary for the emergence of the social bonds of cooperation between those who collectively engage in politics; there is an irreducible social dimension to doing politics." But trust also plays a significant role in the relation between citizens and the democratic state—which partially returns us to the discussion on legitimacy—although trust and legitimacy are not the same, as, for instance, Rosanvallon (2008: 3) argues. Here, trust in democratic institutions is seen as important to

the functioning of democracy itself, and "Numerous studies have lamented an endemic distrust of politicians, low levels of electoral participation, the decline of political parties, and widespread political apathy or passivity" (Jones in Rosanvallon, 2008: x). Interestingly, though, these discussions on trust have a counter-pendant, as distrust is also seen as an important component in the relation between citizens and the democratic state, as this allows for critical evaluations of the workings of the state and for democratic participation to play its role.

Finally, knowledge and literacy are considered conditions of possibility of participation and democracy. This connects to the importance of rational argumentation and critique, briefly touched upon by Derrida (2002: 29) when discussing the right to philosophy: "there is no democracy in general without [the right to philosophy]." This also implies that education, as knowledge acquisition, becomes an important element for democracy. This type of argument can be found with Flores (2014: 113), who writes: "The lack of education is, as we have already pointed out, one of the obstacles for democracy and a pending matter if we are truly committed to democracy, especially, in the substantive partnership conception." She continues by arguing for "the participation and representation of all the citizens, including a better and greater education of all the people … men and women, poor and rich, religious and non-religious, old and young" (Flores, 2014: 114). Also in the field of (media and information) literacy, a similar line of argument can be found, with, for instance, Türkoğlu (2011) arguing that critical media literacy is a precondition of participation and democracy, while Gutiérrez (2019: 47) describes data literacy as "a key condition of possibility for participation, whose absence can impose a formidable barrier."

3.4. Democratic Culture and Its Value-Discourses

A last set of conditions of possibility is situated more at the discursive dimension, even though they are always performed and practised (bringing in a more material component). There are many value-discourses articulated with democracy, often grounded in the Enlightenment project (see Hasan, 2021), but here we will only discuss those value-discourses that are conditions of possibility for democracy, which is different from the core defining elements of democracy or the value-discourses potentially articulated with democracy in a substantive democratic approach (as discussed earlier).

A first concept is autonomy, which—as a concept—mostly relates to the individual citizen. Here, in particular, anarchist theory offers a good starting point, with, for instance, Wolff (1998: 13) writing that:

> Every man [sic] who possesses both free will and reason has an obligation to take responsibility for his actions, even though he may not be actively

> engaged in a continuing process of reflection, investigation, and deliberation about how he ought to act.

In democracy, autonomy—as Hutchings (1998: 166) states in relation to civic republican democracy—generates "the natural right of an individual to self-government," while in liberal democracy, this ground is "the moral law which entrenches the primacy of individual right." In both scenarios, the concept of the individual autonomous citizen, capable of reason and in possession of free will, is a necessity. Of course, this does not imply that there are no restrictions on free will and autonomy. Even Wolff (1998: 13)—as mentioned before, writing from an anarchist perspective—adds that "The responsible man is not capricious or anarchic, for he does acknowledge himself bound by moral constraints. But he insists that he alone is the judge of those constraints." Or, in Lipson's (1995: 2249) words: "A constrained choice or act can be an autonomous one, as long as, and insofar as, the source of the constraints is the person himself." Arguably, the rule of law (see Section 1, and Bass (2005: 637) in particular) does complicate (and can potentially dislocate the autonomy discourse), as citizens subjected to the rule of law—considered vital for liberal democracy—might see their autonomy curtailed beyond their will. At the same time, the concept of autonomy also grounds the rule of law, as the idea of the individual citizen who is responsible for their actions enables the functioning of penal systems, thus using autonomy to—often but not always temporarily—suspend autonomy.

Hutchings's (1998: 166) discussion of autonomy brings in a second level, equally important for the discussions on the conditions of possibility of democracy, when she writes that—again in civic republican democracy[12]—a contract is generated "which constructs an autonomous people," who are also labelled "an exclusive sovereign people." As Kalyvas (2005) analyses in detail, sovereignty is a much-critiqued notion, with many (often-contradictory) layers—caused by, for instance, the distinction between state and popular sovereignty, and more absolutist interpretations, as is illustrated by Bodin's (1992: 1) definition of sovereignty as "the highest power of command." Here, in this book, sovereignty is seen as articulated with autonomy, to refer to the construction of a political community, deemed legitimately demarcated from other groups or communities. Even though a global political community is thinkable, the articulation of liberal democracy with stateness automatically produces multiple political communities, and thus frontiers (often organized through citizenship, see Section 1). While the nature of these frontiers is deeply political—for instance, in relation to indigenous inclusions (Curry, 2004) or to the degree of permeability of the enclosure or 'corral', as Schinkel and Van Reekum (2019) call it—the acknowledgement of the existence of sovereign political communities remains vital and necessary.

Finally, a third necessary concept—as a condition of possibility for democracy—is the rejection of violence to settle political disputes, at least within the

political community (but potentially also outside). As a starting point of this argument, we can expand on the distinction between conflict and violence (and the democratic unacceptability of violence), which we already touched upon when referring to Mouffe's (2005) and Canetti's (1960) work. Helpful here is Wallensteen's (1991: 130) definition of conflict as "subjectively experienced or objectively observable incompatibilities," which is much broader than violence. Still, the threat of violence remains, as Mouffe (2000: 131) argues, writing that "we have to realise that the social order will always be threatened by violence." But still following Mouffe (1993b: 153), we can also argue that democracy is grounded in the transformation of antagonism into agonism:

> Instead of shying away from the component of violence and hostility inherent in social relations, the task is to think how to create the conditions under which those aggressive forces can be defused and diverted and a pluralist democratic order made possible.

In other words, for democracy to work, it is necessary to "tame" or to "sublimate" (Mouffe, 2005: 20–21) antagonisms, without eliminating conflict from the political realm.

Still, in this discourse on non-violence, there are a number of complexities. First, again, the articulation of (liberal) democracy with stateness and the rule of law produces a setting where the rule of law needs to be protected and policed. This tension is resolved through the concept of the monopoly of violence, allocated to the state and its representatives—even though this is not always straightforward (see, e.g., Carey et al., 2013). This construction allows the maintenance of the ban on violence for those who are not mandated to use violence, through the state's monopoly.

A second complexity is generated by the dubious status of what Bourdieu calls symbolic violence and the fluid borders between incivility and rudeness, critique and violence.[13] Bourdieu refers to symbolic violence (from a gender studies perspective, in *Masculine Domination*) as "a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling" (Bourdieu, 1998: 1–2). This "logic of domination" uses a "symbolic principle known and recognized both by the dominant and by the dominated" (Bourdieu, 1998: 2). In a co-authored book, Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 168) define symbolic violence as "an act of recognition and misrecognition, which is situated beyond the control of the conscious mind and the will, in the misty regions of the schemata of the habitus." Even though the absence of violence is considered a condition of possibility for democracy, there is a degree of toleration towards symbolic violence, with the frontier of acceptability established through political-legal negotiations.

The third complexity is related to the nature of social relations when moving away from antagonistic conflict. When considering Mouffe's position on an agonistic-democratic culture, the democratic other becomes an adversary (contrasted with the enemy-other), where the former's identity is structured through a "we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognize the legitimacy of their opponents" (Mouffe, 2005: 20). But this model reduces the possible diversity of democratic others and more synergetic modes of otherness, as has been, for instance, captured in Carpentier's (2017: 184) palm tree model. One democratic other is the neighbour, which has been addressed in, for instance, the work of Levinas (1978). For Levinas (1978: 159), the neighbour remains an other, but this other-neighbour takes a crucial place because "my relationship with the Other as neighbor gives meaning to my relations with all the others." Also, Bobbio's (1987: 42) idea of brotherhood—referring to the French '*fraternité*' and calling for the "recognition of the bonds of kinship which unite all human beings in a common destiny"—brings in a different model for a democratic other. Finally, Derrida's (2005a) attempt to shift from fraternity to friendship, in his *Politics of Friendship*, offers a key model for thinking of the democratic other, which is more synergetic than agonistic. Again, these articulations and modes are negotiated in discursive-material political processes that can articulate these others in a variety of ways, but that all place the other into a sphere of non-violent interactions.

4. Threats to Democracy

As we argued in the first section (which deals with the core components of democracy), democracy is inherently unstable and contingent, as its main objective—to decentralize power relations, at least to some degree—produces power oscillations, where societal elites are tempted to strengthen their power positions and weaken (or undermine) the participatory component of democracy. In some cases, elites do this out of mere self-interest, in other cases to protect (their perception of) the general interest, for instance, to enhance the efficiency of decision-making or transcend societal conflict, as is the case with so-called 'technocratic governments'. Moreover, the reach of democracy—dealing only with the politics of institutionalized decision-making or, in contrast, implementing its broad application in the realm of the political—produces more contestations about democracy's nature, bringing some authors to argue that democracy is "unrealized" (Enwezor et al., 2002), always "to come" (Derrida, 2005b) or simply inexistent (Dahl, 1971).

To expand on the latter: Dahl's (1971) usage of the concept of polyarchy is driven by the idea that democracy, with its "continuing responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens" (Dahl, 1971: 1), simply does not exist. To use his words: "since (in my view) no large system in the real world

is fully democratized, I prefer to call real world systems that are closest to the upper right corner [of his liberalization/inclusiveness model] polyarchies" (Dahl, 1971: 8). Using a different vocabulary, Derrida writes about democracy-to-come, also arguing that democracy has not (yet) presented itself:

> In the end, if we try to return to the origin, we do not yet know what *democracy* will have meant nor what democracy is. For democracy does not present itself; it has not yet presented itself, but that will come. In the meantime let's not stop using a word whose heritage is undeniable even if its meaning is still obscured, obfuscated, reserved. Neither the word nor the thing "democracy" is yet presentable.
>
> (Derrida, 2005b: 9—emphasis in original)

Thomson (2015: 97), writing about Derrida's democracy-to-come, summarizes the latter's thoughts in the following manner:

> in the phrase "democracy-to-come" we should hear not the security of a glorious democratic future guaranteed by the extension of global justice, but something more like the continued unfolding of a traumatic event of political struggle.

Democracy itself—with its diverse discursive articulations (in different societal fields) and material practices—is not excluded from political conflict, and, as also already mentioned in the first section of this text, some political projects aim to disrupt, dislocate or destroy democracy. In particular, authoritarian models have posed significant threats to democracy, although they are not the only ones—communist, libertarian and anarchist models have also (had) the objective of replacing democracy, even though those with non-authoritarian ambitions currently only pose a limited threat to democracy. This is why we will focus on the discursive-material threats posed by the authoritarian models, with their tendency to (re-)centralize power and weaken the rule of law.

At the same time, some political struggles (*within* democracies) can also undermine democracy from the inside, with, for instance, attempts to violate the human rights of particular parts of the population, and to tolerate (or even stimulate) violent practices, within the democratic state, or in relations with other states. Also, the withdrawal from politics and its struggles poses a potential threat to democracy. But the threat to democracy that will be discussed first is more philosophical (or discursive, one could say), even though it might still be capable of structurally hollowing out democracy, in almost invisible ways, by not fulfilling its promises.

4.1. Democracy's Unfulfilled Promises

Thomson's (2015: 97) reflections about Derrida's democracy-to-come highlight the "promissory structure" of democracy, which combines "both the risk

of less democracy, and the possibility of more," with the former implying a threat to democracy. In *The Other Heading*, Derrida (1992: 78—emphasis removed) describes this promissory structure in the following terms: Democracy-to-come is

> not something that is certain to happen tomorrow, not the democracy (national or international, state or trans-state) of the future, but a democracy that must have the structure of a promise—and thus the memory of that which carries the future, the to-come, here and now.

For Derrida (2005b: 86), democracy is aporetic, which means that it "will never exist, in the sense of a present existence"; and Derrida (2005b: 86—emphasis removed) lists the following contradictions as explanations:

> force without force, incalculable singularity and calculable equality, commensurability and incommensurability, heteronomy and autonomy, indivisible sovereignty and divisible or shared sovereignty, an empty name, a despairing messianicity or a messianicity in despair, and so on.

In a slightly more concrete version, Thomson (2015) focusses on the singularity/equality contradiction, and the unfulfilled promise it generates, by reframing it as the excellence/equality contradiction. His argument is that even when the participatory dimension protects democratic societies against the dictatorship of a king-philosopher, who might be less excellent, wise and benevolent than Plato wished for, the material dynamics and processes of democratic decision-making might not always result in excellent decisions or qualified elected representatives either. In this sense, the material practice of democracy (potentially) dislocates the democracy-as-ideal discourse. Thomson (2015: 94) develops this argument as follows:

> Because democracy presumes the basic equality of its citizens, it threatens to undo philosophy's promise to make distinctions based on excellence, and hence to identify the best regime. Because decisions are to be based on the counting of opinions, rather than the identification of truth, democracy will never live up to the philosophical ideal.

But the tension between "incalculable singularity and calculable equality" (Derrida, 2005b: 86—emphasis removed) is not the only one that characterizes democracy's (unfulfilled) promises. At least as important is the tension between commensurability and incommensurability, which brings us to the notion of the decision, which, in Laclau's (1996) vocabulary, can be seen to refer to the moment of fixation, where "discourses are articulated in particular ways and discursive struggles are waged, leading to particular outcomes" (Carpentier, 2016b: 95). At the same time, there is "a radical undecidability

that needs to be constantly superseded by acts of decision" (Laclau, 1996: 92). This implies that the decisions made in a democracy—or in any other governing structure, for that matter—are never final but always need to be followed by an endless stream of novel decisions, never able to fully resolve or close societal conflicts. Resolutions deemed final become unsettled by changing contexts, rendering democracy's decision-making processes (and their outcomes) imperfect and necessarily frustrating.

When Derrida (2005b: 86—emphasis removed) refers to the tension between "heteronomy and autonomy," he touches upon the tension in democracy between the self and the other, where the self sees their autonomy curtailed by "a law come from the other" and "a responsibility and decision of the other" (Derrida, 2005b: 84). As he continues: "It is thus a question of separating democracy and autonomy, something that is, I concede, more than difficult, indeed im-possible," especially because there is also an "other in me, an other greater and older than I am" (Derrida, 2005b: 84). This tension also connects to the desire for homogeneity—the wish or fantasy that all others are the same. It is the desire for, in Derrida's words (2005b: 14), "symmetry, homogeneity, the same, the like, the semblable or the similar."

Finally, another tension that Derrida (2005b: 86—emphasis removed) mentions—which contributes to the unfulfilled promise of democracy—is the one between "indivisible sovereignty and divisible or shared sovereignty," where the former, in relation to the nation-state, "is being more and more called into question." This tension is the Derridean version of the discussion on multilevel governance, as explained by Fanoulis and Musliu (2017: 13): "The idea of pooled/shared sovereignty focalises on the prospect of fully attaining a European home beyond nation-states." Here, the tension is—at least partially—related to the displacement of the centre(s) of decision-making, generating unclarity and hampering transparency and accountability. Moreover, the political conflicts between the different intra-state, state and extra-state level decision-making centres might also be detrimental to the democratic quality of decision-making, privileging power struggles between different levels over the development of policies.

As argued before, in the case of (maximalist) participation (Carpentier, 2014), the (unfilled) promise of full democracy could also be approached through the Lacanian concept of fantasy. It is important to stress that in Lacanian psycho-analytic theory, fantasy is conceptualized as having (among others) a protective role (Lacan, 1979: 41), and remains connected to drive and desire, which also shows fantasy's generative capacities. The full democratic fantasy—or ideal—then becomes an engine that drives us towards the logics of equalized power-sharing and maximalist participation, through the promise of the *jouissance* that it will produce. At the same time, the discursive and material tensions that characterize democratic practice render the realization of the fantasy of full democracy impossible. As Lacan (1989: 111) puts it: "'That's not it' is the very cry by which the jouissance obtained is

distinguished from the jouissance expected." This also implies that the fantasy of full democracy will always be frustrated, as it can never be completely achieved, which may backfire and jeopardize democracy itself.

4.2. The Threat of Non-Participation

One of the key discussions that captures this frustration deals with political apathy, or non-participation. The absence of the material practices of citizen participation—for instance, through non-voting—is seen as a threat to democracy, as it disrupts one of the necessary components of democracy, namely the presence of both participation and representation, and the presence of a political community. Different arguments are used to ground this concern, including the idea that the lack of care for democracy would weaken the popular defence against the elites' tendency to strengthen their power positions in society. Also, the idea that the different levels of political apathy in different parts of, or groups in, society would divide the political community feeds into these concerns. One example is Edsall and Edsall's (1991: 282) analysis of the consequences of "political cynicism and alienation":

> the American experiment itself, endangered by a rising tide of political cynicism and alienation, and by basic uncertainties as to whether or not we are capable of transmitting a sense of inclusion and shared citizenship across an immense and diverse population—whether or not we can uphold our traditional commitment to the possibilities for justice and equality expressed in our founding documents and embedded in our most valued democratic institutions.

Still, the threat of political apathy is not recognized (as such) by all scholars, as the appreciation of apathy as a threat intersects with the position authors take in the debate about the balance between participation and representation—which is one of the key areas of political struggle over democracy. This also renders, as DeLuca (1995: 10) writes, the notion of political apathy a contested notion: "In democratic discourse, political apathy is an important appraisive concept, yet in accepting a particular set of criteria for its proper application, one goes some way toward accepting, even ratifying, a complementary democratic theory as well."

This is translated into the question of whether political apathy is exclusively negative, or whether—as Berelson et al. (1954: 314) write—the "Lack of interest by some people is not without its benefits, too." A few years later, Eulau (1956: 260) links non-participation to a "politics of happiness," comparing the USA with Europe, stating that "the over-politicalization of many European countries is the product of a politics of unhappiness. The greater involvement of Europeans in their public affairs is not, *ipso facto*, an unmitigated good." This is what Green (2004: 747) calls the "realist apologist view,"

which tends to align with the more elitist-democratic theories (that argue for more minimalist versions of participation). Green (2004: 747) contrasts this view with the perspective which sees political apathy as "an unambiguous limit to the flourishing of democratic ideals which hinders the realization of a 'true' egalitarian government." Still, one could argue—following DeLuca (1995: 10)—that these different positions all still require a certain level of participation, without which democracy would become jeopardized. In other words, the structural absence of the material enactment of participation is still to be acknowledged as a threat to democracy.

These two democratic-theoretical positions have also developed different explanatory frameworks, which DeLuca (1995: 11) calls the 'two faces' of political apathy. While more elitist-democratic theories emphasize "individual responsibility for nonparticipation," participatory-democratic theory "shifts responsibility or attributes causal agency to other sources, perhaps elites, institutional practices, social structures, or even the organizing principles of a society." Of course, as Green (2004: 746) writes, it would be "unwise to insist too strongly upon the neatness of the opposition between apathy in which the individual chooses to withdraw from active political life and sociological forms of apoliticism which unburden the individual of responsibility for political silence." Or, as Eliasoph (1998: 255) puts it, in more poetic language:

> Simple apathy never explained the political silence I heard. Inside of "apathy" was a whole underwater world of denials, omissions, evasions, things forgotten, skirted, avoided, and suppressed – a world as varied and colorful as a tropical undersea bed.

Still, the choice of an individual *not* to participate in democracy should be considered a legitimate choice to make.[14] Carpentier (2011a: 126) here uses the concept of 'the right not to participate': "participation [is] to be seen as invitational, which implies that the enforcement of participation is defined as contradictory to the logics of participation, and that the right not to participate should be respected." Similarly, Habermas (1996: 499) writes that "A legal duty, say, to make active use of democratic rights has something totalitarian about it." Earlier, in the same text, Habermas (1996: 120—emphasis in original) includes a similar statement:

> Private autonomy extends as far as the legal subject does *not* have to give others an account or give publicly acceptable reasons for her action plans. Legally granted liberties entitle one to *drop out* of communicative action, to refuse illocutionary obligations; they ground a privacy freed from the burden of reciprocally acknowledged and mutually expected communicative freedoms.

4.3. The (Re)centralization of Power

The relationship between participation and representation can also be affected by elites increasing[15] their power positions, countering the decentralization of power that characterizes democracy. Katsambekis (2023) mentions some of the different labels used to describe this process:

> Authoritarianism becomes "authoritarian populism", or just "populism". Similarly, "illiberalism", "anti-pluralism", "demagoguery" or (new) "despotism", among others, emerge as alternative names to describe the threat, while even various versions of fascism (that is, prefascism, neo-fascism) have been put back on the table.

This threat to democracy is partially represented as an external threat, as Keane (2020: 11) does in *The New Despotism*, with the warning that the "world is gradually being shaped by self-confidently alternative methods of governing people." This leads Keane to state that:

> Today's most obvious threats to democracy—the inner decay and corruption of a declining American empire and the growing global ascendancy of a powerful China—seem for the moment to be more funereally paced [than in the 1920s and early 1930s period].
>
> (Keane, 2020: 11–12)

Keane's (2020: 14) "first-cut" definition of despotism—"despotism is a new type of pseudo-democratic government led by rulers skilled in the arts of manipulating and meddling with people's lives, marshaling their support, and winning their conformity"—also provides the space for the inclusion of democratic states. Hungary, for instance, features prominently in *The New Despotism*. Here, Keane's (2020: 17) argument is that "new despotisms experiment with locally made democratic procedures such as elections, public forums, and anticorruption agencies"; he labels them "phantom democracies."

Although Keane's qualification of Hungary—as controlled by a despotic regime—is questionable, it does raise important issues about more authoritarian tendencies within (European) democracies and their problematic relationship with (respect for) the rule of law and human rights. These issues relate to already established regimes (with Hungary as an example) but also to the (often right-wing) radical political parties that currently strive for political power throughout the European political landscape.

One concept that has often been used in the context of Hungary (see, e.g., Krekó and Enyedi, 2018) is the notion of illiberal democracy, with Zakaria (1997) as one of the early contributors to this debate. For Zakaria (1997: 24), an illiberal democracy "mixes a substantial degree of democracy with a substantial degree of illiberalism," organizing democratic elections but "ignoring

constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms" (Zakaria, 1997: 22). Kauth and King (2021: 370) write that in illiberal democracies "options for voicing discontent are already limited, participation in the political process is made increasingly difficult, and the rule of law is frequently undermined to serve the government's objectives."

Even though Zakaria's (1997) interpretation of illiberal democracy also implies taking a position in the struggle between procedural and substantive democracy, Zakaria emphasizes the threat that illiberal democracy poses for undermining the hegemony of liberal democracy:

> Illiberal democracies gain legitimacy, and thus strength, from the fact that they are reasonably democratic. Conversely, the greatest danger that illiberal democracy poses—other than to its own people—is that it will discredit liberal democracy itself, casting a shadow on democratic governance.
>
> (Zakaria, 1997: 42)

Apart from illiberal democracy, authoritarian populism has also been used to describe the rise of political parties (and entire regimes) that aim to (re)centralize power. Populism is here defined as a discourse that constructs an antagonistic relation between elite and people (Rooduijn and Akkerman, 2015: 2), but when populism becomes articulated with governance and leadership, it combines a horizontal with a vertical dimension, arguing for the replacement of the 'old' elite (the 'establishment') by a 'new' elite who are seen as being a genuine part of the people and thus entitled to their leadership position. Often, this implies a reliance "on strong leaders who are able to mobilize the masses and/or conduct their parties with the aim of enacting radical reforms" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 62). Authoritarian populism, with "the combination of authoritarian values disguised by populist rhetoric," is regarded by Norris and Inglehart (2019: 6) "as potentially the most dangerous threat to liberal democracy."

In establishing the nature of this threat to democracy, it is worth returning to Zakaria's (1997: 22) introduction, where he cites the USA diplomat Richard Holbrooke, providing an example of Popper's paradox of tolerance, when stating, before the 1996 elections in Bosnia: "'Suppose the election was declared free and fair,' he [Holbrooke] said, and those elected are 'racists, fascists, separatists, who are publicly opposed to [peace and reintegration]'." Popper (1947: 226) formulates this paradox in the following terms: "if we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them." Even though the material articulation of democratic procedures can be considered part of a struggle *within* democracy, the concern is that the paradox of tolerance will result in the destruction of democracy from *within*. Concepts such as

'democratic backsliding' (Bermeo, 2016), 'democratic erosion' (Schedler, 1998; Plattner, 2014) and 'autocratization' (Cassani and Tomini, 2020) are indicators that democracies can self-destruct, but also that this is an (extensive) process, with a long duration, that thus can—potentially—be reversed. Still, these concepts also indicate that democracies can be threatened through the centralization of power by particular political elites.

4.4. Closing Down the 'Corral'

The fourth threat to democracy concerns the functioning (and delimitation) of the political community. As the intersection of democracy with the state has become hegemonic, the political community is restricted through the notion of citizenship, even though counter-hegemonic models, such as cosmopolitan democracy (e.g., Held, 1995; Archibugi, 2008) do exist. Derrida (2005b: 53) extends these boundaries even further by, for instance, referring to ecological democracy (Disch, 2016):

> does this measure of the immeasurable, this democratic equality, end at citizenship, and thus at the borders of the nation-state? Or must we extend it to the whole world of singularities, to the whole world of humans assumed to be like me, my compeers [*mes semblables*]—or else, even further, to all nonhuman living beings, or again, even beyond that, to all the nonliving, to their memory, spectral or otherwise, to their to-come or to their indifference with regard to what we think we can identify, in an always precipitous, dogmatic, and obscure way, as the life or the living present of living [*la vivance*] in general?

Still, the hegemonic articulation of the state with democracy unavoidably produces delimitations in relation to who is included in the political community and who is not (as was already mentioned in Section 1). The question here is *how* this frontier is constructed and policed, how diversity within this frontier is handled and what the—potentially negative—consequences of these practices can be for democracy itself.

When turning to the first question, then the discussion concerns the permeability of the frontiers delimiting democracy (through the articulation of citizenship) and the nature of the measures to prevent entry or inclusion. This brings us to discussions on migration and the existence of an "underlying hierarchical concept of humanity that casts migrants, and other minorities, as standing outside the boundaries of rights to liberty and equal treatment" (Kauth and King, 2021: 369). When the state becomes a 'corral', or a "biopolitical space where populations are trained for the circulation of labour and capital" (Schinkel and Van Reekum, 2019: 11),[16] disabling the possibility to enter, sometimes subjecting those who try to the "politics of death" (as is currently the case in the Mediterranean) (Schinkel and Van Reekum, 2019: 10), then democracy's ethical basis and legitimacy become weakened. As

Schinkel and Van Reekum (2019: 142) remind us, migration is constructed through borders, which are discursive-material assemblages in their own right, "as if there can be something as 'life-behind-a-border' … As if borders exist without them being transgressed." Still, the logic of the corral generates difference: "because you are in your where-ness, you are always right [and] you should always be able to say what you want about those who move beyond their where-ness" (Schinkel and Van Reekum, 2019: 144).

This implies that also *within* the delimited realm of democracy, democracy can be threatened. An old example is the discussion of the tyranny of the majority, which captures situations where an elected majority takes decisions that go against the interests of particular minority groups, depriving that minority of "its primary political rights" (Dahl, 1989: 171) and generating an oppressive situation. These concerns are quite old. For instance, in his *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville (2010: 413–414) writes: "what repels me the most in America is not the extreme liberty that reigns there; it is the slight guarantee against tyranny that is found." De Tocqueville (2010: 415) links this potential tyranny to government, when, for instance, writing that "Tyranny can be exercised by means of the law itself," while John Stuart Mill (2003: 76) also includes societal forms of tyranny in his *On Liberty*:

> the tyranny of the majority was at first, and is still vulgarly, held in dread, chiefly as operating through the acts of the public authorities. But reflecting persons perceived that when society is itself the tyrant—society collectively, over the separate individuals who compose it—its means of tyrannizing are not restricted to the acts which it may do by the hands of its political functionaries.

More contemporary debates, for instance about denizenship,[17] still focus on exclusionary practices towards minorities. For instance, in their discussion on illiberalism, Kauth and King (2021: 367) distinguish between disruptive illiberalism and ideological illiberalism, with the latter referring to the "unequal allocation of rights and duties," which is connected to exclusion.[18] Kauth and King (2021: 375)—based on Behrend and Whitehead's (2016) discussion—are careful not to qualify all forms of social exclusion, and the "uncomfortable situations" they generate, as "anti-democratic structures." As Behrend and Whitehead (2016: 6) specify: "The political illiberalism that concerns us here involves actively discriminatory features of subnational politics that severely limit or render ineffective formal citizenship claims."

In all these cases, whether we label them exclusionary practices or the tyranny of the majority, democracy becomes suspended for particular groups, whether they are blocked from becoming part of the political community, or whether their membership is only partially acknowledged. Even though radical proceduralists might disagree, we argue here that the violation of the human rights of a part of society harms and threatens democracy as a whole.

4.5. Violence, Antagonistic Other(ing)s and War

The last threat to democracy is related to democracy's rejection of violence as a decision-making instrument. As already discussed in the section on the conditions of possibility of democracy, violence needs to be differentiated from conflict, as the latter is a much broader concept. While conflict is perfectly acceptable in democracies—and arguably even necessary—violence is in principle incompatible with democracy, and its use needs to be minimized through the functioning of the rule of law and the allocation of the monopoly of violence to the state.

Derrida (2005a: 22) emphasizes the importance of what he calls the "community of friends" when writing that "there is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy without the 'community of friends', without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal." Writing more explicitly about violence, Keane (2004: 1) labels violence as the "greatest enemy of democracy":

> unwanted physical interference with the bodies of others, such that they experience pain and mental anguish and, in the extreme case, death – violence, in a word – is the greatest enemy of democracy as we know it. Violence is anathema to its spirit and substance.

A variation of this position, that focusses less on the role of state violence, can be found in Powell's (1982: 154) work:

> Where large-scale violence or coercion does appear, democracy is fundamentally threatened. Not only does the influence of coercion on decision-making weaken the importance of democratic resources, but the failure of government to maintain order and security leads citizens to look more positively on authoritarian alternatives.

This articulation of violence as a threat to democracy does not imply that violence remains completely absent in democracies—as, for instance, Mouffe (2000: 131) argues. Within democratic states, violence, labelled as crime, occurs on a semi-permanent basis. Sophisticated systems to reduce its occurrence and to temper its impact on society have been developed, but this produces new problems. Keane (2004: 174) points to the complex balance in which these punitive responses are situated, always risking the activation of disproportionate state violence to oppress dissent:

> Getting violent with violence is, however, risky. It cultivates the illusion that the violence of imprisonment and capital punishment reduces violent

> crime … The key problem is the chain reaction that is triggered when violent power is exercised over others. The power to get others to do what they would otherwise avoid doing, backed by violent means, easily breeds arrogance, the belief that the powerful are immune from responsibility towards others who are meanwhile forced to suffer pain and humiliation. A culture of control spreads. And whenever arrogance mixes with violence and power, the temptation to brutalise the bodies of those who resist is just around the corner.

One problematic example is the use of lethal force by police officers, which, particularly in the USA, has attracted major public attention. The shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, USA, in 2014 is one of the recent pivotal moments, feeding into the establishment of the Black Lives Matter movement, but police violence in the USA has a much older history (Chevigny, 1995; Johnson, 2003). More recent projects, such as, for instance, *The Counted*, by the British newspaper *The Guardian*,[19] show the widespread nature of police killings in the USA. And projects like these, as Seigel (2018: 182) argues,

> confirm the profound racism of police killings, the higher rate of such killings in the United States as opposed to other countries, the high percentage of all homicides committed by police, and the high likelihood that unarmed people will perish at the hands of police.

Excessive police violence is also a threat to democracy, as it is structurally unjust and thus violates a sense of justice and ethics. It feeds a culture of fear and oppression, but also reduces the legitimacy of the state's monopoly of violence and provokes more (and equally problematic) violence in response.

At the same time, care should be taken not to underestimate the disruptive forces of (organized) crime, also for democracy, as the workings of, for instance, the Italian mafia, with its corruption, have illustrated (Schneider and Schneider, 2003). Corruption, in its many different versions, and "widespread perceptions of corruption—entail a host of public and private costs. One of the most serious and lasting is the erosion of confidence in the very legitimacy of public governance," as Marshall (2021: 2) writes. Structurally, organized crime—and relationships between organized crime and the field of institutionalized politics—are threatening for democracy as they generate zones of illegitimate privilege and profit, and of fear and harm, disrupting the difficult balance between freedom, difference and equality that characterizes democracy, bringing in structural injustice into the political realm, which, in itself, is already a disruptive force.

One particular type of violence with which the state is confronted is political violence and terrorism, which can again take many different forms. Bermeo (2016) discusses election-day vote fraud and the strategic manipulation of elections, where the latter includes

> hampering media access, using government funds for incumbent campaigns, keeping opposition candidates off the ballot, hampering voter registration, packing electoral commissions, changing electoral rules to favor incumbents, and harassing opponents—but all done in such a way that the elections themselves do not appear fraudulent.
>
> (Bermeo, 2016: 13)

But there are also more intense versions of political violence. For instance, Powell (1982) discusses separatist violence and military and executive coups. Moreover, Europe has also had its fair share of political assassinations. But terrorism has also posed a considerable threat to democracy, as it often aims to inflict damage on democracy itself. Here, not only the damage done to people and property matters, but also how democratic states respond. Wilkinson (2006: 20) describes this as follows:

> If the government is provoked into introducing emergency powers, suspending democracy in order to defend it, there is always the risk that by using heavy repression to crush the terrorist campaign the authorities may alienate the innocent majority of citizens caught up in the procedures of house-to-house searches and interrogations.

A(n even) more complicated debate concerns the democratic threat of symbolic violence, and the impact that (the communication of) antagonism can have. As mentioned before, in the section on the conditions of possibility of democracy, there is considerable toleration towards the deployment of symbolic violence, also because of its fluid borders with democratically legitimate practices. Moreover, there is also considerable silence about structural (material) violence in society, as Keane (2004: 191)—using rape as an example—writes: "Democracies continue to harbour many forms of violence that are suffered in silence," where this silence can also be considered a form of symbolic violence. At the same time, the thin lines between (symbolic) violence, incivility, playfulness and critique—combined with the silence about violence—feed the toleration for symbolic violence. Here, the risk for communicatively antagonistic societies is that symbolic violence becomes complemented with physical-material violence, which further increases its harmfulness towards democracy.

Finally, democracies can also be exposed to external violence, as already mentioned in the discussion on the increased presence of despotic regimes and their competitive stance towards democratic states. But democracies themselves can also unleash deadly violence, as the 'war on terror' has demonstrated. Cox et al. (2009: x) then ask—in relation to this 'war on terror'—the following question: "What has become and what is to become of the very idea of a democracy given the lawlessness and barbarity of democratic nations like the US?" It is this question that suggests that wars waged by democracies, sometimes outside their territories, also affect (and threaten) these democracies themselves.

As Agamben (2005) argues—in his *State of Exception*—these military logics feed into the suspension of democratic rights, motivated through a discourse of exceptionality. He adds the concern that "Faced with the unstoppable progression of what has been called a 'global civil war'; the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics" (Agamben, 2005: 2). This renders the state of exception "a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism" (Agamben, 2005: 3), and—as a warning—he cites Rossiter (1948: 314), who has written the following "grotesque" (Agamben, 2005: 9) words, in all seriousness: "No sacrifice is too great for our democracy; least of all the temporary sacrifice of democracy itself." A position more aligned with Agamben's critique can be found in Derrida's (2005b: 40) *Rogue*:

> we see an American administration, potentially followed by others in Europe and in the rest of the world, claiming that in the war it is waging against the "axis of evil", against the enemies of freedom and the assassins of democracy throughout the world, it must restrict within its own country certain so-called democratic freedoms and the exercise of certain rights by, for example, increasing the powers of police investigations and interrogations, without anyone, any democrat, being really able to oppose such measures … It must thus come to resemble these enemies, to corrupt itself and threaten itself in order to protect itself against their threats.

5. A First Visual Summary

In Figure 1.4, we find all components of the model of the realm of democracy represented in one model.

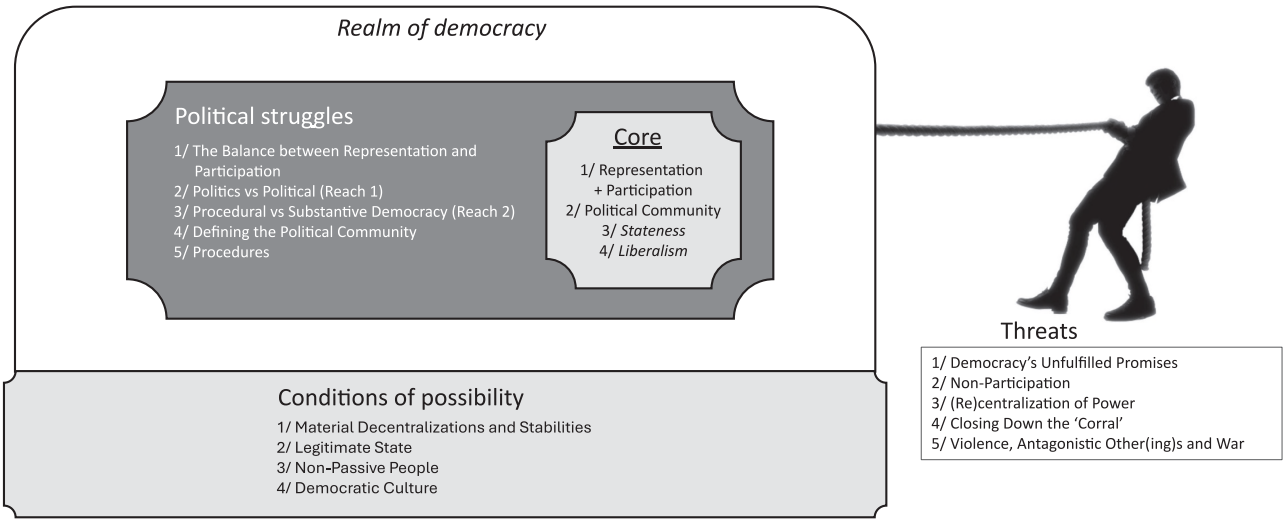

Figure 1.4 The complete model of the realm of democracy

Notes

1 Based on the entries on 'democracy' and '-cracy' in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
2 This partially overlaps with Kelsen's (2013: 27) argument on the significance of freedom and equality in the definition of democracy: "political ideology insists upon combining freedom and equality, and precisely the synthesis of both principles is characteristic of democracy."
3 The last argument differentiates these projects from anarchist models (see, e.g., Honeywell, 2021).
4 Visual element of a person tugging derived from work by master1305, available on Freepik.
5 For an extensive discussion, see Held, 1996.
6 There are, for instance, Beck's (1997) concept of sub-politics, Giddens's (1991) concept of life politics and cultural studies' use of the politics concept (see, e.g., Hall, 1997: 257).
7 Talisse (2013: 142) argues that the democratic models that are described in our book as maximalist participatory models also lean towards substantive democracy (see also Figure 1.2).
8 These value-discourses play a significant role in European societies anyhow, but in the substantive approach, they become articulated with democracy itself, which renders their meaning particular.
9 These different models partially overlap. Bogaards (2019), for instance, points to the overlapping nature of centripetal and consociational democracies. Also, some definitions of consensus democracy (e.g., Bass, 2005: 637) are broad enough to also include consociational democracy.
10 Shifting the focus from cognition/experience to democracy is not a straightforward operation, as these objects remain very different.
11 Even though there are critiques of the broad-sweeping nature of these kinds of analyses, see, for instance, Femia (1972).
12 In liberal democracy, Hutchings (1998: 166) states that the nature of this contract is different, namely that it is a "contract of individuals to set up a public, sovereign authority."
13 One classic example is Stella Nyanzi's poem about the genitals of the mother of the Ugandan president, which landed her in prison. See Benfield and Bratton (2021).
14 The discussion about the legitimacy of non-participation is important, but it remains distinct from the analysis of the causes of non-participation.
15 Theoretically, a structural decrease in the activity levels of democratic rulers can also threaten democracy. Given the prominence of elite power centralization in contemporary European societies, we focus on this threat in this book.
16 All translations of non-English literature (into English) were done by the authors.
17 Denizenship originally (see Hammar, 1989) refers to the (reduced) rights of permanent residents in a foreign country. Here, we use it in the expanded meaning, as the reduced political, civil and social citizenship rights (see Marshall, 1992) within a populace. Turner (2016) calls the latter denizenship type 2.
18 In contrast, disruptive illiberalism refers to the "disguised anti-democratic attacks of autocrats in the making" (Kauth and King, 2021: 367).
19 https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/series/counted-us-police-killings

Part II

Media and Democracy

In Part II of this book, we focus on the intersection of democracy and media, offering in particular a reflection on what we prefer to call 'media's democratic roles', in the understanding that this label connects the two assemblages, namely the democratic assemblage and the media assemblage, each with their discursive-material entanglements. In order to organize this reflection, we will mostly follow the same structure as Part I (see Figure 1.2), as this structure has been developed through the theoretical analysis of the two realms, leaning on both democratic theory and media theory.

In our conclusion, we will return to the structural similarities (and differences) that characterize both parts of the book, but in this Part II, we will first engage in a discussion of what—in the contemporary era—the core defining elements of the media assemblage are, connecting it to public sphere theories (and other related concepts) and to the existing discussions about media's democratic roles. As we—also in this part—argue that the democratic roles of the media are objects of political struggle, we will discuss these (internal) struggles first, and then their conditions of possibility and their (external) threats.

6. Core Components of Media

6.1. Defining the Media Assemblage

The concepts of medium and media also have a diversity of meanings, ranging from meanings that include all extensions of humans (McLuhan, 1964) to very particular communication technologies. This diversity is also captured by the etymology of the word medium, which originates from the Latin language (referring to "middle, centre, midst, intermediate course, intermediary"[1]). Medium is related to many other words, including the German 'Mitte' ('middle'), the Italian 'intermezzo' ('interlude'; from Latin 'intermedius', which means 'between something', the 'middle') as well as the French 'milieu' ('environment' or 'company'; where 'middle' came from the Old French 'mi' ('half', 'in the middle') and from the Old French 'lieu' ('place', from the Latin 'locus')) (Mock, 2006: 185). Based on this etymological overview, Mock

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(2006) then continues to identify four basic understandings of the medium/media[2] concept, which again demonstrate their semantic diversity: (1) media as a means of perception (as a 'prerequisite' for communication), (2) media as a means of understanding, (3) media as a means of dissemination and (4) media as a form of communication.

Moreover, the media concept has a rich philosophical and democratic-theoretical history, in dialogue with the development of a variety of 'new' (material) technologies (Guillory, 2010), at different times in history, with always particular affordances (Norman, 1988). As a consequence, the media concept has also gained different meanings in different discourses, demonstrating that it cannot be considered stable over time and place. Still, these different media—together, in always varying ways, consisting of always different technological-institutional assemblages—constitute a dynamic space of communication, rendering visible, in always particular ways, (some) political phenomena that are—or could be—of significance to the members of a society or group.

An important delimitation, though, is that in this book we are not concerned with media in the very broad sense of the word—such as power, money and love—which is discussed (as media) in sociological systems theory. Nor do we focus on language or bodies as media themselves, however relevant this may be. By media we mean—staying relatively close to the everyday language usage of the concept—the technological-institutional assemblages that humans use to communicate across place and time. Kubicek (1997) labels media that fit this description "second-order media." In Kubicek's terminology, "first-order media" are technological systems with certain functions and potentials for the dissemination of signifying practices. Internet protocols are an example. The concept of second-order media implies the inclusion of socio-cultural institutions in the assemblage. In our example, we are no longer talking about the internet in its technical meaning only, but about, for example, the specific medium of the online newspaper and its journalists. This understanding of media thus allows for the incorporation of the media's signifying practices and the organizational structures that produce these signifying practices—such as publishing houses and broadcasting companies—into the media assemblage.

In other words, media's first core defining element is that they are assemblages that include communication technologies but simultaneously articulate these machines with the signifying practices that circulate through them and with the (institutionalized) organizational structures that produce these signifying practices and *make* them circulate, allowing media to support communicative action (Hepp, 2013: 1ff.). Media thus become seen as signifying machines (Carpentier, 2017: 62), that allow for the circulation of signifying practices inside and outside their organizational boundaries, which, in turn, allows for the circulation of discourses, but also for their validation and (potential) modification. Simultaneously—as Huhtamo and Parikka (2011)

argue—media remain deeply material through the technologies they articulate within their assemblages, but also because of their organizational (infra)structures and the bodies of their operators, ranging from journalists to printers, from IT specialists to managers, and the material production processes and routines they all engage in. Again, these material components are entangled with a range of discursive elements, for instance, the ethical and professional production norms and the clusters of (media) professional identities.

Arguably, the second core defining element of media is their audiences. As media are driven by the practice of communication, producing and circulating signifying practices, they need an audience to complete their identity. At the same time, the audience concept is, in itself, highly contingent, or in the words of Carpentier et al. (2004): ungraspable. One illustration of this fluidity (and the difficulties it brings) is the Allor–Hartley exchange, where Allor (1988a: 228) first concludes in his discussion of the different articulations of the audience concept that "the audience exists nowhere; it inhabits no real space, only positions within analytic discourses." After Hartley's (1988) critique, Allor (1988b: 252) changes this thesis to "the audience exists everywhere," without giving up on his discursive approach towards the audience. There are many approaches to structuring how the concept of the audience is theorized, and a "totalizing account [is] a logical impossibility" (Jenkins, 1999). One way to capture this diversity is through the identification of the two major dimensions that are labelled active/passive and micro/macro, based on Littlejohn's (1996: 310) *Theories of Human Communication*, where he writes that:

> disputes on the nature of the audience seem to involve two related dialectics. The first is a tension between the idea that the audience is a mass public versus the idea that it is a small community. The second is the tension between the idea that the audience is passive versus the belief that it is active.

One particular audience articulation is that of the audience as public, which constructs the audience as political actor. Again, we encounter the same significatory complexity as with the audience as a whole (see Coleman and Ross, 2010, on the public's multiple meanings), but here the notion of the citizen—and not the consumer—produces the nodal point of this articulation. To use Dewey's (1946: 27) words, published in 1927: "For the essence of the consequences which call a public into being is the fact that they expand beyond those directly engaged in producing them." In a European context, the public is closely connected to the public service media tradition, as, for instance, Ang (1991) argues. In this tradition, the public is a collective of "citizens who must be reformed, educated, informed as well as entertained—in short 'served'—presumably to enable them to better perform their democratic rights and duties" (Ang, 1991: 29). The audience-as-public articulation also contains a

(relatively weak) reference to the articulation of the audience as community, especially when this collective of citizens is seen as a nation, as an imagined community or as a political community (Ang, 1991: 36).

The popularization of the internet has also affected discussions on the identity of the audience, as audience members have become constructed as more active. One example here is Bruns's (2007, 2008) concept of the 'produser'. Another contribution that captures this change is Rosen's (2008) essay *The People Formerly Known as the Audience*. Rosen argues in this essay that the (commercial) media system has lost control over its audiences, as it has been (re)transformed into "the public made realer, less fictional, more able, less predictable" (Rosen, 2008: 165). He describes this change as follows:

> The people formerly known as the audience are those who were on the receiving end of a media system that ran one way, in a broadcasting pattern, with high entry fees and a few firms competing to speak very loudly while the rest of the population listened in isolation from one another – and who today are not in a situation like that at all.
>
> (Rosen, 2008: 163)

More generally, the notion of the user was embraced. In Digital Media Studies, this concept was adopted partially out of a discomfort with the link between audience and mass communication, as exemplified by Lievrouw and Livingstone's (2006: 27—emphasis in original) introduction to *The Handbook of New Media*:

> there is an uncertainty over how to label people in terms of their relationship with new media. The term *audience*, which was and to some extent still is satisfactory for mass media research, fits poorly within the domain of new media. In a number of important ways, audiences are becoming "users". … the term 'user' … better covers this variety of modes of engagement.

Arguably, one of the main reasons why the notion of the user became popular was because of its capacity to emphasize online audience activity, where people were seen to 'use' media technologies and content more actively.[3] But we can turn this argument around, to show that the audience (or user) has now become, even more than before, a defining component of media. After all, it is hard to imagine a materially empty internet.

Given the diversity of the media landscape(s), we also need to acknowledge that we cannot speak of 'the' media or 'the' audience/public. Numerous forms of media, as well as audiences/publics, exist side by side. Different rules, norms, conventions and legal frameworks apply to these different institutions, and the establishment of new rules and processes of institutionalization—e.g.,

in relation to 'new' media—are rife with conflict, which only adds to the fluidity and complexity. Keywords that illustrate these contemporary settings are the "mediation of everything" (Livingstone, 2009), "cross-media" (Bjur et al., 2014), "polymedia" (Madianou and Miller, 2013) or the "media manifold" (Couldry, 2012). Media—assemblages in their own right—are thus part of comprehensive and complex (mega-)assemblages (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980: 25; de Landa, 2006; Luckhurst, 2006) which establish and maintain the public communicational space.

With the increased prominence of the digital, the dynamics of the production, representation, reception and appropriation of media have reached an additional level of complexity. The current media landscape is characterized by the steadily growing field of artificial and virtual communication through and with software and algorithms (see Hepp et al., 2024; Schäfer and Wessler, 2020), but also by the resulting changes in media (production) practices (Lünenborg and Raetsch, 2018) and by changes in the selection, reception and appropriation of media's signifying practices by their audience (see Hasebrink et al., 2023). This rise of algorithms and communicative robots (Hepp, 2020) has arguably generated a "third order medium" with powerful information intermediaries. The mechanisms behind their signifying practices are often opaque, virtually the trade secret of private companies that created applications such as Facebook, YouTube, iTunes, Google or Reddit. Also in this case, they are not 'only' technical platforms that reflect already-existing media realities: Algorithms increasingly curate the respective media reality of individuals (e.g., Sørensen, 2020), on the basis of massively collected user data, which challenges the traditional journalistic media and existing media policies (Puppis and Ali, 2023).

6.2. Media as Part of the Public Sphere

One way to connect media—and the communicative public spaces they support—to the polis is through the concept of the public sphere. The central theoretical-analytical idea behind this concept is that the public sphere is constituted by "private individuals" who "assemble to form a public body," to discuss "matters of general interest" (Habermas, 1974: 49). These elusive social and cultural groupings—often deploying a set of material infrastructures—produce a diversity of signifying practices that invoke a variety of existing discourses but also have the potential to contribute to the generation of new ones. These signifying practices can also relate to different fields—Habermas (1974: 49), for instance, distinguishes between the political and literary public spheres—and they can activate different (media and non-media) assemblages. In late modern society, all kinds of media operate within the public sphere and play a vital role there, as Hartley (1999: 218) points out:

> Hence the public sphere can be rethought not as a category binarily contrasted with its implied opposite, the private sphere, but as a "Russian doll" enclosed within a larger mediasphere, itself enclosed within the semiosphere. And within "the" public sphere, there may equally be found, Russian-doll style, further countercultural, oppositional or minoritarian public spheres. For instance, an indigenous public sphere, a feminist public sphere, even a music sphere.

The public sphere is thus not a stable and uniform entity. On the contrary, it is constituted by older, but still tangibly present public spheres (although completely altered)—including the forum and the agora from antiquity and the salons and coffee houses from the Enlightenment—and by contemporary public spheres, e.g., those in the fields of institutionalized politics, education and the arts, further complemented by the public spheres that media provide, including those in the online realm. Imhof (2003: 203) emphasizes this broader nature of the public sphere in the following terms:

> On the basis of the normative contents inscribed in the concept of the public sphere, it becomes clear that the public sphere is not absorbed by the media, neither in terms of its political-legal and social-integrative nor in terms of its deliberative fields of meaning.

Even though the contemporary public sphere thus has many non-media components, it would be difficult to ignore the role of journalistic mass media (Habermas, 1989; Calhoun, 1992) in the public sphere. There is ample evidence that in late modern societies these media remain important channels of exchange through which a significant part of the public sphere is constituted (e.g., Ferree et al., 2002). Still, mass media's role is—as Baecker (1996: 102) describes it—not without complexities:

> It may be that the mass media find it easier than other systems to access the public sphere and to feed the self-descriptions gained from it into their own system. But it may also be that they find this more difficult because they tend to think of themselves as the public. Some signs of the way the mass media deal with the public tend to suggest that they have a particularly divided relationship with it.

Moreover, apart from the traditional journalistic mass media, there are also other media,[4] which also play a vital role in the public sphere, such as, for instance, community media (see Schiller, 2007) but also—and increasingly—online media. In parallel, authors such as McKee (2005), Hermes (2006) and Lunt and Pantti (2007) have pleaded for the inclusion of the field of popular culture as a part of the public sphere. As Hermes (2006: 37) writes: "If

popular culture has the power to make people bond and feel they belong, we are, in effect, considering popular culture as a public sphere, in which democracy is at work."

At the same time, two interacting processes, the monopolization of the public sphere by the media field (at the expense of other societal fields) and the marketization (or colonization) of the public sphere, which is—at least in Habermas's terms—part of the life world, and not of the state or market, give reason for concern, as these processes reduce the richness and diversity of the public sphere, particularly at the expense of civil society. Still, keeping Mouffe's (2000) notion of the democratic revolution in mind—and on a more positive note—we should also acknowledge that the feudal public sphere—the display of power and splendour by royalty and aristocracy to the people, which at the same time served to represent and legitimize the feudal/absolutist system—has withered away in Europe. Citizens have countered this old public sphere with the 'revolutionary' programme of the democratic public sphere, which contributes to the distribution of political information, generates tools for opinion-formation, and enables political deliberation and participation, and the discursive justification and exercise of power by the people. In addition, the public sphere allows for a certain degree of communicative mediation—or more soberly: exchanges—between state institutions, on the one hand, and the citizens—individually and organized within civil society—on the other hand.

6.3. Democratic Media, Culture and Connection

Public sphere theory is not the only way to think the political relation between media, democracy and society. Against the backdrop of the assumption that civil society is important for the emergence and vitality of the democracy/media nexus, in this subsection, we (briefly) touch upon Dahlgren's concept of civic cultures (2009), the reflections of Couldry et al. (2007) on public connection and the concept of political discourse culture by Hepp et al. (2012), as examples of theorizations of this political relationship. These reflections are particularly important because of their encompassing nature, which implies that they will also feed into the following sections.

With his concept of civic cultures,[5] Dahlgren refers to "sets of preconditions for populating the public sphere" (Dahlgren, 2005: 319). Apart from the more material components, namely practices and spaces, he stresses the importance of knowledge, values, trust and identities, in comprising civic cultures. When civic cultures are strong, they can empower citizens, but Dahlgren (2013: 24) also points out that civic cultures are "by no means free-floating" and "always vulnerable to structural factors such as political economy and organised power. They can be subverted or simply prevented from emerging by intentional, strategic measures." In *Media Engagement*, Dahlgren and Hill

(2023) also more explicitly develop the link between civic cultures and media. Here, they write that:

> While they [the media] constitute much of the communicative space, they are obviously also essential for suitable knowledge; they also play a role in disseminating, challenging and innovating values, as well as supporting or undermining trust in various contexts. Most practices and skills relevant to engagement have media implications. And especially now, with social media, there is massive "identity work" taking place online, often crossing and blurring the lines between the private and the public self.
>
> (Dahlgren and Hill, 2023: 81)

Couldry et al.'s (2007) concept of public connection captures the individual involvement in political spaces. In their work, the political is understood in broad terms, as a realm in which matters of general interest are negotiated, whereby people's public connection can be mediatized via the appropriation of certain media content as well as via involvement in associations, political parties or the like:

> Public connection is an orientation to a space where, in principle, problems about shared resources are or should be resolved, a space linked, at least indirectly, to some common frame of collective action about common resources.
>
> (Couldry et al., 2007: 7)

Finally, the concept of cultures of political discourse attempts to grasp the socio-cultural (or discursive) structure of the political realm, enabling—what we would call—particular (kinds of) signifying practices. Not isolated from public sphere theory, Hepp et al. (2012: 13) refer to "the culture producing a certain kind of political discourse, both national and transnational" in relation to the construction of Europe, where the latter "involves the various transnational cultural patterns of media communication which mark the transnational stratification of an emerging European society" and thus its multi-segmented nature. They argue that—again in a European context—there are particular ways to construct our realities, or, in other words, that discursive-material formations are spatially contextualized. Even if Hepp et al. (2012: 5) are very careful not to get caught in an essentialist construction of Europe, and they argue for an analytical approach, they still state that "we must reconstruct this specific European character." In addition, these cultures of political discourse are not seen as "harmonious phenomena," but "[t]hey are … marked by contradiction and conflict, also including struggle over their character" (Hepp et al., 2012: 28). Moreover, these cultures are

> multilevel phenomena that are not solely articulated at the level of production … [but] are also manifested at the levels of representation (political discourse in the media), appropriation (citizens making this discourse their own), various forms of identification (defining oneself as related to a certain public issue or part of a certain political unit) and their regulation (patterns of regulating this discourse).
>
> (Hepp et al., 2012: 28–29)

7. The Roles of (European) Media in Democracy

Not only are media and democracy complex discursive-material (meta-) assemblages (as Sections 2 and 6 have highlighted), but they also intersect in a variety of ways, with every conception of democracy implying certain requirements for media, i.e., for its actors, practices, structures, roles, etc. More proceduralist and minimalist models of democracy focus on the supportive role that media can play in democratic elections, informing the citizenry so that they can optimize their choices. In contrast, more substantive and maximalist approaches have much broader expectations as they articulate media as one of the realms of democracy, and—as in some older reflections—as a fourth estate, a part of institutionalized politics, as "a power, a branch of government, with inalienable weight in law-making" (Carlyle, 1904: 164).

In these more maximalist versions, the consensus-oriented models of democracy (and participation) emphasize the importance of dialogue and deliberation. They focus on collective decision-making in a public sphere, based on rational arguments, *à la* Habermas. Other authors (e.g., Fraser, 1990) stress more conflict-oriented approaches and point to the unavoidability of political differences and struggles, seeing the media as crucial sites for struggles over hegemony (Kellner, 1992: 57). What these maximalist versions have in common is, first, that they—implicitly or explicitly—use a broadly defined notion of the political, where the media field becomes (partially) integrated into the political. Second, they articulate multiple sites of societal decision-making, where dialogue, deliberation, debate and struggle play a role within the media field itself, and affect the field of institutionalized politics and many other societal fields. This also implies that participation plays a role in a multiplicity of societal fields, as the exercise of communication rights is seen not only to facilitate participation in institutionalized politics, but also as (contributing to) the democratization of a variety of other societal fields, including the media field.

More minimalist versions, captured, for example, in such concepts as the informed citizenry—see Schudson (1998) for a critique—and the marketplace of ideas (see, e.g., the libertarian normative media theory (Siebert et al., 1963)), still accept the political relevance of the media field but simultaneously articulate it as a support system for institutionalized politics. The media

field allows for discourses related to this field to circulate and for citizens to (dis)identify with them; in this way, the media field facilitates the functioning of representative democracies (Carpentier, 2011b: 67–68).

One of the main areas where these reflections have been developed—and where these ideological struggles over the democracy/media nexus are waged—is normative media theory (e.g., Hutchins, 1947; Siebert et al., 1963; Merrill, 1974; Altschull, 1984; Hachten, 1984; Picard, 1985; McQuail, 1994: 127ff.; Curran, 1997; Christians et al., 2009). As these normative media theories have received ample attention, we will not go into too much detail here, but it is important to clarify that this (mostly theoretical) (sub)field has generated a diverse range of positions that all speak to the roles of media in democracy and which provide fertile ground for the discussion in this section. Also, public sphere theory, which we briefly discussed in the previous section, is important for our purpose here. Of course, as with all discursive constructions, we need to be aware that their performance in the social realm always frustrates the normative expectations ingrained in these discourses, as Peters et al. (2004: 6ff.) explain, even when this does not devalue the importance of these expectations or discourses:

> On the one hand as a diagnostic or critical question about possible deficits of real publics, on the other hand as a question about the possibilities or chances of realisation of normative models, which under certain circumstances can be critically turned back against the normative model.

Given the diversity of discursive-normative constructions (and their performances), this section aims to provide an overview of the equally diverse number of roles, keeping in mind that some of these roles are only appreciated within the more substantive and maximalist approaches to democracy. Following earlier work of one of us (Carpentier, 2007: 159), five roles are distinguished: the informational role, the control/watchdog role, the forum role, the representational role and the participatory role.

7.1. Informing Citizens

The informational role of media in democracy is the most frequently acknowledged role in discussions on the democracy/media nexus, and it has a strong discursive focus. By exercising this role, media support democracy by facilitating the free and transparent formation of individual political positions—or identifications with particular discourses—by gathering, selecting and disseminating news on matters of general importance, thus satisfying citizens' information needs.

The core of this informational role is thus the support that media provide to the formation of what is labelled 'political opinions', enabled by a context of

media freedom, which is deemed necessary to guarantee informational diversity. The argument here is that the functioning of a democracy presupposes that the members of its political community have access to the information they need to form their opinions on all political issues considered relevant, and media are allocated a central role in producing and distributing this information. This role thus requires media to produce representations of events that are deemed factual and truthful, in combination with the signifying practices of relevant political and expert actors and further contextualizations, in order to generate a better understanding of these events, the involved (political) actors, their politics, strategies and motivations, and the links with their discursive-ideological positionings. As this role has been closely linked to journalistic news media, it is considered to be regulated (and protected) by (a desire for) objectivity, and objectivity's components of factuality, relevance, truth(fullness), impartiality, balance and neutrality (Westerståhl, 1983).

The informational role is articulated with—and legitimated through—transparency, as citizens—in order to participate in institutionalized politics—need to have access to signifying practices that will allow them to (dis) identify with particular ideological positions and political actors, and to evaluate their policies and activities. At the same time, the media's informational role also supports institutionalized politics and its political actors by producing representations of the different political positions—facilitating political dialogues and debates—and by providing evaluations from outside the field of institutionalized politics (where mainstream media sometimes have claimed to speak 'on behalf of the people'). This opens up possibilities for scrutiny and criticism, with, for instance, investigative journalism informing citizens about undesirable developments or dysfunctions (see the next subsection). Also, online media platforms—with their different levels of moderation—create opportunities for citizens to respond to (political) signifying practices and communicate their critical evaluations and (dis)identifications.

The informational role of media is at the same time grounded in a series of assumptions whose deconstruction demonstrates the problems with the materialization of this role. First, the information distribution process by (news) media is not a linear process but open to a wide variety of interpretations by its audience members, which are not ideologically neutral. Second, the distributed information is not neutral either. Problems of the selection and distribution of information and the related processes of societal surveillance have been part of academic scrutiny for decades. Only the question of whose information will be offered illustrates the difficulties hidden behind the notion of information. But media (and their sources) are also prone to simply making errors (resulting in misinformation). In addition, media organizations have always been targets of propaganda efforts originating from a diversity of actors, and media have contributed themselves to the production of propaganda (Taylor, 1995; Jowett and O'Donnell, 1999), or have allowed propaganda to be distributed. A third type of argument claims that it is epistemologically impossible

to map out the exact boundaries between 'factual' information and the discourses that are contained in these signifying practices. Factuality builds on representational regimes that are unavoidably present, varied in their nature, and at the same time targeted by hegemonic projects.

7.2. Controlling Power Holders

A second traditional media role in democracy is the control that media can exercise over those in power, a role which is also labelled the watchdog role. Very much inspired by liberalism's critical position towards (political) power holders, the media can exercise a protective role towards democracy by communicating abuses of power (Curran, 1996: 83). This allocates to the media the role of "scrutineer of officialdom and elected representatives" (Street, 2001: 151). McQuail (1994: 131) here points to the 'right to be irresponsible': "to show no respect for authority, privacy or decency, the possibility for which can be one small safeguard against conspiracies of the rich and powerful." As these citations also illustrate, the watchdog role is aimed, in significant part, at institutionalized politics, but this is not an exclusive focus, as the watchdog role can also apply to, for instance, dysfunctions in the business field.

In particular, investigative journalism has been seen as spearheading the materializations of the watchdog role. Forbes (2005: 1), in his discussions on the definitions of investigative journalism, points to the distinction between "general investigations in areas such as consumer issues, and more serious investigations conducted into, for example, nepotism, corruption, smuggling or corporate malfeasance," with the latter qualifying as investigative journalism. Umejei and Suleiman (2021: 205) use a similar negative-relationist strategy to differentiate investigative journalism from 'other' journalistic practices, as the former is characterized by "reporter initiative, methodological rigour in collecting evidence and writing up the story and the impact of the story in instigating reforms." Even when there is considerable discussion on the status of investigative journalism, there are a substantial number of hopeful voices pointing to a "rejuvenation" of investigative journalism (e.g., de Burgh, 2021: 1), driven by new trans-media collaborations (Alfter, 2021) and online technologies that have provided additional resources for journalists to engage in investigative journalism, as is captured by the label of Digital Investigative Journalism (Hahn and Stalph, 2018; Carson, 2020).

It is important to note that the watchdog role is (almost) exclusively situated in the discursive domain, as it relies heavily on publicness. Media produce signifying practices about dysfunctions—sometimes after long and intensive research, which also has its material dimensions—but these signifying practices are then expected to have material consequences in other societal fields, e.g., adjusted voting behaviour, legal action or alterations within the field of institutionalized politics. This reliance on external responses is one of

the weaknesses of the watchdog role, together with the vulnerability of media and their journalists to external pressures. In several cases, political actors have attacked media and their journalists, either physically or rhetorically, as is evidenced by former/future USA president Donald Trump's 'fake newsing' strategy (Gore, 2017; Benkler et al., 2018: 105–144; Sunstein, 2021: 17–21), bringing in more antagonistic forms of conflict between media and political actors, and limiting media's capacity to maintain a power balance in relation to the field of institutionalized politics.

Another problem with the materialization of the watchdog role is that media have not always performed it, or even wished to perform it, which has triggered the lapdog critique. Gitlin (1991: 123), for instance, critiqued journalists, quite some time ago, for "dancing attendance at the campaign ball while insisting that they were actually following their own beat." Starkman's (2014: 1) analysis—aptly entitled *The Watchdog That Didn't Bark*—shows how the "U.S. business press failed to investigate and hold accountable Wall Street banks and major mortgage lenders in the years leading up to the financial crisis of 2008." Finally, de Burgh et al. (2008: 3) are even stronger in their formulation, when they write that "the techniques of investigative journalism … can be put to partisan, commercial or corrupt use as much as to right wrongs or overcome evil."

In principle, the decentralized nature of online media also allows for citizen journalists (or non-professional journalists performing journalistic tasks) to engage in investigative journalism—and to act as watchdogs—more than before (see Atton and Hamilton, 2008), which does occur (Bruns, 2003; Allan, 2009). But in practice, the semi-publicness of online media has often turned the monitoring situation around, with citizens more often being the ones scrutinized than being the ones scrutinizing, as the political usage of data analytics (Becker et al., 2017; Ginsburgh et al., 2020) has demonstrated. Even though this changing relation between institutionalized politics and citizens is not a strong form of antagonism, the panoptic politics of observation and the potential forms of manipulation that can be derived from it still weaken the democratic position of citizens.

7.3. Facilitating Societal Debate and Democratic Struggle

Media also contribute to democracy through the creation of a forum that allows for a "competitive exposure of alternative viewpoints" (McQuail, 1994: 129). In practice, this 'forum' is a multitude of extremely diverse fora—each with its own discursive and material characteristics—clustered together under the label of 'forum'. However, this forum (role) still allows for the discussion of generally relevant problems and the cooperative search for solutions to these problems. More closely related to the deliberative models of democracy, the forum role transcends the informational role through

its emphasis on the representation of a diversity of—possibly contradictory—perspectives on particular matters and on the confrontation of these different perspectives (and the underlying discourses) with each other. These societal debates and struggles, in the deliberative model, ideally result in the creation of consensus—through "the unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1996: 306)—although the more conflict-oriented approaches suggest that these (temporary) closures come through the establishment of hegemony and the elimination of the weaker—not necessarily the argumentatively worse—perspectives. Whatever the approach to conflict and consensus in democracy is, rendering the arguments and positions visible and allowing them to engage with each other remains a role where media are seen to contribute to democracy.

The (older) theories that focussed more on traditional media assumed—often implicitly—that the communication of these diverse perspectives was journalistically curated, with selection processes that were driven by (a desire for) ethics and objectivity (as already mentioned in the previous subsection). Despite the importance and relevance of journalistic curation (or gatekeeping), these curatorial practices have been critiqued on several fronts. For instance, the news values behind news curation are seen to have a series of counter-productive consequences. Not only is there a strong emphasis on novelty and negativity, but the forum role has also been particularly impacted by the articulation of balance as a dichotomized party-based (or actor-based) balance, resulting in pleas for more argument-based forms of balance (Carpentier, 2007: 166).

In a more radical fashion, the elitist nature of journalistic curation and the problems related to the mainstream media's capacity to fully materialize the forum role were critiqued by community and alternative media movements (Girard, 1992; McQuail, 1994: 131). Voices from these movements argued for a stronger emphasis on the interest of the communities they wished to serve, on engagement, social justice and subjectivity—allowing for what Manca (1989) calls pluralist objectivity—and on a stronger detachment from the market (and the state). Theoretically, the resistance against the mainstream (media) has also been captured by Fraser's (1992, see also Downey and Fenton, 2003) concept of the counter-public sphere and the "proliferation of subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1992: 69–70; for an empirical meta-analysis of this claim, see Wimmer, 2009). This became even more important with the popularization of online communication, with Downey and Fenton (2003: 198)—and also Cammaerts (2009)—pointing to the communication and mobilization strategies used by extreme right-wing groups, concluding that "the Internet permits radical groups from both Left and Right … to construct inexpensive virtual counter-public spheres to accompany their other forms of organization and protest."

The popularization of online communication, and in particular social media, has had an impact in this area as well, affecting the hegemony of

journalistic curation itself. This process brought Williams and Deli Carpini (2000) to point to the "collapse of media gatekeeping" and to the existence of a "multiplicity of gates" (Williams and Deli Carpini, 2000: 66). Much later—and expressed in a more careful manner—Vos and Heinderyckx (2015) argue that gatekeeping is "in transition." As Vos (2015: 9) writes in the introductory chapter of the latter publication, journalistic curation still matters, though, also in relation to the media's forum role:

> Journalists generally hold that news plays a valuable role in democracy by performing a number of essential tasks, such as reporting up-to-the-minute news, providing a forum where ideas of public significance can be discussed, and checking abuses of political and economic power … The fact that others share in this responsibility does not detract from an obligation to do so according to the journalist's conscience.

One of the significant consequences of the ability to bypass mainstream media's curation is the increased ability of political actors to directly address audiences through social media, even though "the opportunity to directly address large audiences through social media accrues to very few politicians and is an increasingly coveted goal for some of them" and "drawing large crowds online does not necessarily translate into influence" (Vaccari and Valeriani, 2015: 1029). The weakening of the hegemony of journalistic curation, and the increased circulation of non-journalistically curated content, has led some authors to focus on the more negative consequences for the media's forum role. In particular, the post-truth concept (McIntyre, 2018) captures the now highly visible presence of lies,[6] imaginings and delusionary ontologies in the public sphere. Or, to cite the rather plastic subtitle of Ball's (2017) book, this approach focusses on "how bullshit conquered the world." This also connects to the cynical usage of non-curated online communications by political actors, as, for instance, has been the case with the former/future USA president, Donald Trump, about whom McIntyre (2018: 1–2) asks the following question: "If Donald Trump could claim—without evidence—that if he lost the election it would be because it was rigged against him, did facts and truth even matter anymore?"

More positive approaches point to the still strong presence of journalistically curated content, also through its redistribution over social media, and to the increased importance of social media fact-checking by traditional media—what some have called the rise of 'factcheck journalism' (Lehmann-Jacobsen, 2022). This is combined with a critical analysis of the overemphasis on online participatory dysfunctions, which "produces the risk of discrediting the notion of participation itself, through its alignment with the dark sides of human behaviour" (Ribeiro et al., 2019: 10). Behind these kinds of critical analyses lies the appreciation for the diversification and decentralization of

the media's forum role and the capabilities of ordinary people to evaluate media content for its truthfulness, but also—in a very Fiskean (1989) sense—to appreciate the playfulness and parodic capacities of active audiences, who might not always take the seriousness of news completely seriously, a process which might also be an enrichment of political communication, and not only a problem.

7.4. Representing the Pluriformity of the Social and the Political

The fourth role of media in democracy is the representational role, as the concept of representation has also obtained a prominent place in different normative models, emphasizing the need to avoid stereotyping and what are called 'misrepresentations'. According to the older versions of these normative models, there is, in other words, a need for fair—sometimes also called 'correct'—representations of more traditional societal groups like migrants and women. For instance, in the (normative) social representational model, as outlined by Siebert et al. (1963), one of the core elements is to provide a "representative picture of constituent groups in society" (Hutchins, 1947, cited by Siebert et al., 1963: 91). Even though Siebert et al.'s (1963: 91) language is outdated—and, by current standards, disturbing—their democratic motivation against stereotyping remains relevant:

> this requirement would have the press accurately portray the social groups, the Chinese and the Negroes, for example, since persons tend to make decisions in terms of favorable or unfavorable images and a false picture can subvert accurate judgment.

Despite the relevance of the discussion on representation in this social responsibility approach, there is also a need to broaden it in order to better understand the representational role of media in democracy. One way to do this is to distinguish between the realms of the social and the political, simultaneously acknowledging that these realms overlap and that their frontiers are unstable.

The social refers to the conglomerate of all kinds of individuals (including so-called 'ordinary people'[7]), societal subgroups, small- and large-scale communities, criss-crossed by differences related to class, ethnicity and gender (among other social categories) and structured through diverse societal fields (including, for instance, the economy and the arts). The social also refers to the immense diversity of lifestyles, practices, affects, pleasures and identities that characterize contemporary societies.

Here, the representational role of media, from a democratic perspective, moves far beyond the news and includes all media content that is produced, ranging from hard news and popular culture (with its entertainment industries) to subcultural communication. Moreover, (especially) in the particular case of

this role, its articulation is deeply intertwined with critiques of mainstream media's failures to materialize it, resulting in strong pleas for the avoidance of generalizations and hierarchizations, combined with sufficient attention to what Smelik et al. (1999: 45) call pluriform representations. This includes, for instance, the avoidance of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978), the fair, respectful and dignified representation of misrepresented groups, and the avoidance and deconstruction of reductionist representations or stereotypes, which includes Hall's (1997: 274) strategy to "contest [stereotypes] from within." In this context, the importance of self-representation—in strengthening the media's representational role—cannot go unmentioned, as it has been performed throughout the history of community media, and—more recently—through the practices of online communication.

One particular area of the social that merits more attention is related to crime and violence.[8] As Gomes et al. (2022: 9) writes, crime news—and a similar point could be made about audio-visual (semi-)fictional crime narratives—has a strong presence. It is "one of the most popular and constant in the total amount of news broadcast by the media," which produces the risk that "the importance of crime in people's lives" (Gomes et al., 2022: 10) becomes exaggerated, feeding a culture of fear and anxiety through the communication of reductionist representations. Hall et al. (1978) refer here to a deviancy amplification spiral that feeds into moral panics: "Moral panics come into play when this deep-structure of anxiety and traditionalism connects with the public definition of crime by the media, and *is mobilised*" (Hall et al., 1978: 165—emphasis in original). As Mason (2003: 7–8) shows, this mobilization can occur through media campaigns, which is illustrated by the *News of the World*'s "naming and shaming of paedophiles' campaign," which was instigated in July 2000 in the UK. This example also shows the processes of othering and stigmatization that often characterize crime representations (Gomes et al., 2022: 7–8),[9] simultaneously being "limited to the description of the event and immediate consequences, not focusing on critical perspectives or wider debates around causes, prevention, or policy" (Gomes et al., 2022: 10). Despite the problematic nature of the reductionist representations connected to crime, and the need for pluriform representations in line with the media's democratic representational role, it is also worth noting the strength of the media's condemnation of—in particular—physical interpersonal and group violence, which also has a (democratic) protective component. Arguably, this is the more positive version of Hartley's (1992: 140) comment that

> journalists are visionaries of truth, seers of distant order, communicated to their communities by a process of photographic negativization, where the image of order is actually recorded as its own negative, in stories of disorder.

The second dimension, namely the representation of the political *an sich*, including institutionalized politics, also matters significantly, where media have—arguably—an educational and a protective (sub)role to play. Although more critical analyses that constitute a horizon for democratic representations of the political exist, they tend to focus on specific (media-related) problems, e.g., the dominance of government/official sources and the deployment of particular narrative structures, such as horse race election reporting (see Bennett, 1996, for an overview). These are complemented by the critiques of post-truth politics, which we already mentioned in the previous subsection, and the critiques of (participatory) online communication, which we will discuss in the next subsection.

By focussing on the media's educational and protective sub-roles—which are grounded in the intersection of democratic theory and Media Studies—we can take a broader perspective on media's democratic representational role in relation to the political field. At the educational level, this role is activated when media assemblages clarify the complexities of democracy, with its inherent struggles. Media assemblages then communicate and contextualize the normality of democratic struggle, with its endless conflicts and attempts to reach a consensus, and with its hegemonic and counter-hegemonic projects. They also play this educational role in communicating and contextualizing the democratic struggles over democracy itself—as discussed in Section 2—explaining the democratic normality of political struggles over the balance between representation and participation, over the expansion of democracy to other societal fields (outside institutionalized politics), over the role and nature of democratic procedure, also in relation to human rights, and over the definition of the political community. In a more minimalist version, media assemblages activate this role when abstaining from the simplification of democratic struggles, and from the essentialization of democracy. Potentially, this educational sub-role can—at least to some degree—counter the frustrations caused by the unavoidability of democracy not fulfilling its promises (as discussed in Section 4).

The protective role in this context consists of the defence of value-discourses considered universalized, which we have termed in earlier work—inspired by Manca's (1989) work—pluralist neutrality (Carpentier, 2007: 165). As mentioned earlier, these value-discourses (amongst others) include peace, freedom, equality, dignity and justice. When focussing on the protection of democracy itself, we can return to Section 4, which discusses the threats to democracy. Apart from this direct protection of democracy itself, through their signifying practices, the democratic-protective role becomes activated when media actively contribute to problematizing attempts to (re) centralize power, to too strong levels of non-participation, to attempts to close down the 'corral', which excludes citizens from the political community, and to the use of (political) violence.

7.5. Facilitating Public Participation

Participation, in all the different societal fields, is always and necessarily connected with questions of power and (in)equality. Against the background of the rapid transformation of media and public spheres, and their significant role in democratic societies, Krotz (1998, 111ff., emphasis removed) formulated the following fundamental questions about the opportunities for participation in the public sphere:

> [H]ow adequate [is] the participation in the organized public sphere that has been possible up to now as the use of standardized news and information broadcasts, and how adequate are the opportunities for participation in representative democracy under today's living, working and media conditions … Citizens must be granted adequate information and participation opportunities in accordance with the state of social and technical development.

If we use Carpentier's (2011a) distinction between participation in and through media, we can first acknowledge that media facilitate participation *in* the field of institutionalized politics. Participation can thus be understood as a practice that is exercised by citizens in always particular processes, under certain circumstances and for certain purposes (see Carpentier, 2016a: 77ff.). In this context, the term participation refers to a continuum with different participatory intensities, where sometimes manipulated or tokenist participatory practices are labelled as participation (Arnstein, 1969), where participation can be latent or manifest, and minimalist or maximalist, with the latter including practices of self-governance (see Carpentier, 2011b; Ekman and Amnå, 2012; Carpentier, 2016a).

Participation in institutionalized politics concerns citizens' discursive-material interventions in political decision-making, through (amongst others) forms of voting, voice, activism and involvement in co-decision-making structures and political organizations. Moreover, political participation can also occur outside institutionalized politics, grounded in everyday social, community and aesthetic contexts (Hepp and Pfadenhauer, 2014: 247ff.). The media's democratic role here consists of offering—curated or non-curated—material platforms that facilitate this active citizenship and that fairly and respectfully represent it, as argued in the previous subsection. Here, mainstream media have struggled to involve non-elite actors, but "a series of genres and formats have allowed for a certain degree of participation by ordinary people" (Carpentier, 2011b: 102), for instance, talk shows (e.g., the subgenre of audience discussion programmes, see Livingstone and Lunt, 1996) and the letters-to-the-editor genre (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2006). Of course, community and alternative media have offered equally important—and more

maximalist—versions of participation in the political field, through their strong emphasis on self-representation and voice.

But media also play an important role in facilitating participation *in* the media field itself, which shifts the mechanisms of participation and democracy to another societal field, beyond institutionalized politics. Again, community media offer opportunities for maximalist participation in the media, supported by a discursive revalidation of non-professional media producers and accessible media production platforms (Carpentier, 2017). Also, the world of online communication has offered a multiplicity of opportunities to "be your own media" (as the Indymedia slogan formulated it). Krotz (2007: 107) states that "computer-mediated communication … can form a potential basis for new forms of publicity and political communication in the long term as a result of the mediatization process." An earlier (online) example is the so-called blogosphere, but present-day social media can also play this role, although in corporate platforms this occurs often only at lower levels, for instance in Facebook *groups*, while alternative social media offer more maximalist forms of participation at the organizational level (see Mannell and Smith, 2022, for an analysis of Scuttlebutt).

The degree to which the contemporary media landscape enables the materialization of this participatory role is the subject of considerable debate. In Dutton's (2009) rather optimistic perspective, these forms of media constitute a "fifth estate" or a "fifth power," which are slowly but surely outstripping the traditional institutions of power (the executive, legislative, judiciary and (journalistic) media powers). Another representative of this more optimistic position, Jenkins (2006: 2), captures the convergence of communication processes from a cultural-theoretical perspective as a 'convergence culture', which he describes as follows:

> Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways.

This process of convergence is said to also enable a new form of participatory culture, in which the possibilities of online communication facilitate civic engagement and political participation in playfully simple ways, as these novel forms of communication allow citizens to easily become part of the media field (Jenkins et al., 2009). For Jenkins (2010), (digital) media can, under certain conditions, function as so-called 'civic media' that enable participation in the public sphere. These civic media are defined as:

> any use of any technology for the purposes of increasing civic engagement and public participation, enabling the exchange of meaningful information,

> fostering social connectivity, constructing critical perspectives, insuring transparency and accountability, or strengthening citizen agency.
>
> (Jenkins, 2010)

Bruns (2007, 2008) makes a similar argument in his approach to 'produsage'—the fusion of individual use and production processes. He states that networked online communication and the self-organized and collaborative production of media content are (nuclei of) political practices that decentralize the hierarchically structured public sphere.

However, more pessimistic voices argue against the increased importance of these new forms of participatory communication, stating that even in the seemingly limitless world of internet communication, strong concentration processes still occur. *In principle*, it is possible for every citizen to publish their opinion. But the technical structure of the internet, the logic of search engines, the individual attention practices and the popularity of corporate platforms such as Facebook, X and Google have resulted in a small group of companies (e.g., Meta Platforms Inc., X Corp. and Alphabet Inc.) obtaining strong power positions and forming quasi-monopolies. For example, Krotz (2017) argues that in some countries, the majority of the public equates the internet with a few platforms such as Facebook, Google and WhatsApp, and everything that is not displayed, shared, etc., on these platforms risks not gaining much publicity, at least not to the same extent. The rise of these corporate platforms has also produced novel competitors for mainstream journalism and new intermediaries on the information market (such as, for instance, search engines) which can now also address the audience directly, without being dependent on the journalistic "pinhole" (see Neuberger, 2009: 54ff.).

In addition to these more political-economy-driven critiques, critiques are also located at the subject-related level, arguing that the personalization and individualization of the public sphere may lead to highly selective individual and/or group-related information spheres—so-called "filter bubbles" (see, e.g., Papacharissi, 2002; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001)—which hamper the capacity to participate in the field of institutionalized politics through the media. Even in cases where public attention becomes more focussed and 'ad hoc publics' are formed, their attention might quickly decline again. The internet campaign KONY 2012 is a prototypical illustration of how a combination of considerable journalistic and online audience attention can disappear just as quickly as it appeared, without much lasting impact (see for more details, Wimmer, 2014).

8. Struggles over Media's Democratic Roles

Also, media's democratic roles are not uncontested, and—as media are not outside the political—they too become implicated in the struggles over their

positions in relation to democracy and the (legitimate) degree of their interventions. Together with the core defining elements, conditions of possibility and threats, these struggles are part of the model of the realm of media's democratic role (see Figure 2.1), which is similar to the approach we used in Part I (see Figure 1.3).

Arguably, the value-discourses of freedom, equality and pluralism—and dignity, but less prominently—play key roles in these struggles, as their discursive articulations and their relationship (and balance) remain contested. For instance, in contemporary Western societies, freedom tends to become privileged over the other value-discourses—this is why Nancy (1994: 68—emphasis in original) writes that "Freedom is *not*": Freedom has become so omnipresent and dominant that it has no clear particular meaning anymore. Another way to capture freedom's discursive omnipresence is to label it an empty signifier (see, e.g., Carpentier, 2022). Not surprisingly, freedom thus features prominently in articulations of media's democratic roles.

Still, equality and pluralism are also implicated in the struggles over media's democratic roles, which also have material components, given the threats, for instance, arising from ownership concentration affecting pluralism, and the importance of having a multiplicity of media organizations—discursive-material assemblages in their own right—to ensure pluralism. Additionally, the processes of journalistic curation have, in the end, many material dimensions, including their sources, procedures and infrastructures. In this section, we will discuss four particular struggles linked to how media pluralism and media freedom are organized, and how the pluriformity of representations and participatory intensities are constructed, that complement the more general political struggle over which roles media should play in democracy.

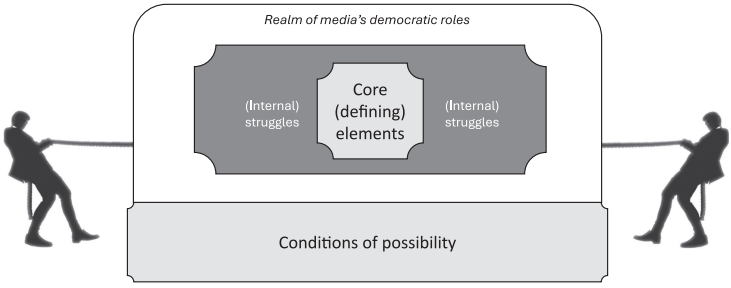

Figure 2.1 Structure of the model of the realm of media's democratic roles with core elements, struggles, conditions of possibility and threats to democracy

8.1. Degree of Media Pluralism

Pluralism is important in relation to several democratic media roles, including the informational and representational role. One main aim of pluralism is to prevent one-sidedness, which can lead to the narrowing in scope of signifying practices and discourses, which would limit the media's capacity to support citizens' informational and identificatory choices, the circulation of a diversity of arguments (in particular those that are part of counter-hegemonic discourses) and the discursive struggles that characterize democracy. Pluralism can be produced in different ways: A provider of journalistic services can (be obliged to) create pluralism in their own media outlet by presenting the different positions in their programmes, newspapers or online publications ('internal' pluralism). European public service media are, for instance, often obliged to follow this model. However, pluralism can also be achieved when many media outlets are available, each of which pursues a certain 'ideological tendency' and thus offers signifying practices from a particular (ideological) position, but which in their entirety represent the ideological-discursive spectrum in society ('external' pluralism[10]) (Barnett and Townend, 2015; Valcke et al., 2015).

One struggle in relation to the organization of pluralism is related to the ongoing, everyday reporting about particular issues. Many news stories involve actors from different fields, who have particular interests in having their perspectives communicated, preferably without contestation. Some actors can exert considerable influence, steering the reporting in particular directions by excluding certain topics and perspectives while emphasizing others (see McQuail, 1992), which impacts media's representational and discursive diversity. In other words, opinion power can counter pluralism. At the same time, journalism has developed procedures to counter these pressures, e.g., the procedures of check-and-double-check, multi-perspectivity and balance, source diversity and the right to reply. Even when these procedures each have their problems, as for instance the critique on bothsidesism (or 'fake balance', see Boykoff and Boykoff, 2004) shows, they do offer protection against outside pressures that would limit pluralism.

A second struggle is more structural and material, as it involves the organization of the media landscape as a whole, and the impact of material ownership. It does matter who owns a media organization, because media ownership may be translated into opinion power. The translation of ownership power into opinion power—jeopardizing the autonomy of journalists and newsrooms—which risks reducing internal pluralism, combined with tendencies towards media concentration, which may reduce external pluralism, opens up an area of struggle where regulatory actors intervene to ensure desirable levels of pluralism, but also where journalists and editors put up fierce—and often invisible—resistance against these structural interventions.

But also, public service media and (non-commercial) community media offer a counterweight to pluralism-limiting market forces and contribute to ensuring pluralism. In particular, community media have offered individuals and societal subgroups a voice on issues that meet their respective needs and interests. They portray issues that may not be represented in the mainstream media and allow for the circulation of counter-hegemonic discourses, enabled through participatory processes which facilitate dialogues within and across communities at a regional and local level (Howley, 2005). Moreover, public service media—given their aim to 'serve the public'—offer a variety of perspectives on the political realm and beyond, and they are attentive to the informational, representative and discursive needs of many societal segments, thus actively protecting pluralism.

The popularization of online communication opened up a third area for struggle, as the entry barriers into the media have been lowered in today's digital media economy—which has the potential to promote pluralism, and does so in many cases. At the same time, the journalistic mechanisms to protect pluralism are not always activated, and, through the workings of filter bubbles and selection algorithms, audiences' exposure to a plurality of perspectives might be limited. Moreover, the voice of 'ordinary people' in the online realm is sometimes articulated as more authentic and valuable than journalistically curated voices, which supports populist hierarchies and ideological homogenization projects, which then may (try to) limit pluralism again. New concentration processes have also materialized, which opens up new struggles in the domains of regulation, production and consumption.

8.2. Degree of Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression and media freedom are fundamental rights, whose legitimacy has become hegemonic, but their particular articulations remain objects of struggle. Freedom, as is emphasized in the liberal tradition, is always in danger of being unnecessarily restricted by states, companies and other societal forces, while the exercise of particular (human) rights might jeopardize other rights, opening up questions about legitimate restrictions to these rights. In unpacking these political struggles, a distinction can be made between individual freedom of communication (and reception) and institutional media freedoms (see McQuail, 1992; Ash, 2016). Freedom of expression, i.e., the right of every person to form an opinion and to express and disseminate it freely through speech, writing and images, is a fundamental human right. It is enshrined, among others, in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights and in Article 19 of the UN Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Freedom of expression protects the whole communication process, from dissemination to reception, statements of verifiable facts as well as subjective opinions and emotions.

If media are activated as a dissemination platform, we also enter the domain of media freedom and their protection against censorship. Weaver (1977) takes a broader perspective by identifying three different ways of defining media freedom. According to Weaver's approach, media freedom can be understood, firstly, as the absence of restrictions on the media by the government; secondly, as the absence of restrictions on the media in general (i.e., by the government or by other actors); or, thirdly, as a combination of the absence of general restrictions and the existence of conditions that ensure the dissemination of a variety of ideas and opinions to wider audiences (see Weaver, 1977: 156ff.). Weaver himself took the first path and defined media freedom—for his study—as the absence of government restrictions. Others chose differently: Picard (1985), for example, chooses the third definition. Furthermore, Picard distinguishes between negative and positive media freedoms, where negative media freedom can be regarded as the absence of general restrictions on the media, while positive media freedom refers to the existence of conditions to ensure the dissemination of signifying practices. For Picard (1985: 48), media freedom consists of a combination of both types.

One area of political struggle relates to the degree of government intervention. Libertarian and neo-liberal voices argue for minimalist state regulation, using a free market discourse. In contrast, other voices defend and welcome these interventions. Picard, for instance, identifies different types of government interventions, such as subsidies or price regulation (see Picard, 1985: 101ff.), and concludes that these regulatory measures can have a positive impact on pluralism, independence and media freedom (Picard, 1985: 148ff.). Also, the creation and continued financing of public service media is a structural and important state intervention. Rozumilowicz (2002: 14) argues against the free market idea, stating that free and independent media "exist within a structure which is effectively demonopolized of the control of any concentrated social groups or forces and in which access is both equally and effectively guaranteed." This also implies that these rights need to be wielded responsibly, which is (often) ensured through self-regulatory practices. This also brings us to journalists and their professional ethics, including the work of the different Press Councils in Europe and the press codes they have published.

Both media freedom and the freedom of expression are central to democracy, but we would like to argue that these rights are not absolute. Still, this position—and the exact nature of possible limits to signifying practices—is another domain of political struggle. Some, so-called free speech absolutists—often based in the USA—reject any limit on free speech. In 1961, Meiklejohn (1961) published an article with the telling title *The First Amendment Is an Absolute*. The famous (legal-constitutional) discussion, whether a person shouting 'Fire!' in a crowded theatre is protected by the First Amendment of the USA constitution, triggers the following answer from Rotunda (2019:

319): "It would be a very rare circumstance that the government could constitutionally prohibit one from shouting 'fire' in a crowded theatre."

Others take a different position in this struggle and argue that there also are (and have to be) legal limits to the freedom of expression (and media freedom). In this position, these limits are related to situations where other people's rights become jeopardized. Still, there are a wide variety of areas to be considered, which include more individual levels (e.g., threats, defamation and libel) and more societal levels. The latter, for instance, concerns situations where the human dignity of others is violated, e.g., the denial of crimes against humanity or spreading hatred against groups of people. Again, whether, under which conditions and to what degree these could and should be regulated is object of a substantial political struggle, as the regulation of hate speech demonstrates (Brown, 2017a, 2017b; Brown and Sinclair, 2019).

8.3. Degree of Pluriform Media Representations

The democratic representational role of media—intersecting with their forum and participatory roles—is another area of (mostly discursive) struggle for a number of reasons. On the basis of the equality argument, one could argue that all people and all social groups must be able to produce and communicate signifying practices, and make the underlying discourses visible, so that the different positions that exist in society are represented and can engage in a societal dialogue and discursive struggle.

However, this was (and is) by no means always the case. People are visible in society in different ways due to different social conditions and different political struggles in their own right. For instance, access to financial resources, levels of education and eloquence, societal status and expertise (amongst other factors) still impact the likelihood of obtaining access to (the production of) many media representations. These factors also influence which media assemblages people can gain material access to, and how they are then discursively represented there: Gaining access to a mainstream media news broadcast is different from gaining access to a reality TV programme,[11] and offers different representational modes. For instance, Filimonov and Carpentier's (2022) analysis of Swedish television series on climate change shows the very different positionality of experts and ordinary people, where the former are represented as actors of persuasion and change, and the latter are the subjects of these objectives, where the former are represented as autonomous and the latter as influenceable, and where the former speak from positions of authority and knowledge, and the latter 'have opinions'.

Also, the notion of journalistic curation implies selection, where criteria such as relevance and balance play a significant role in denying access to particular voices. The term gatekeeping is a metaphor that helpfully describes these selection processes, implying that not all voices are (or can be) welcomed

at a particular moment in curated media content. This generates a tension and struggle over whose (individual) voices can be included and how, which frustrates the right to communicate (see D'Arcy, 1969, for the original formulation, and Carpentier, 2017: 142–143, for an overview). Moreover, journalistic curation has also had perverse effects, in structurally excluding the bodies and voices of particular societal groups, or in—often inadvertently—generating stereotypical representations of them. This brings us back to the earlier discussions on the avoidance of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978) and the fair, respectful and dignified representation of societal subgroups. Moreover, analyses of news reporting recognize and criticize the contemporary media logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979)—i.e., the way media selectively choose events and topics and produce signifying practices about them—and the tendencies towards the focus on scandalization and moralization on the one hand and personalization, emotionalization and intimization on the other. Through these processes, media audiences' curiosity is sometimes instrumentalized, in order to increase circulation and reach (e.g., Strömbäck and Lee Kaid, 2008).

As a result, so-called 'bias' tends to occur. Here, we prefer to label this process the structural occurrence of reductionist representations,[12] which undermine the dignity of particular societal subgroups. The nature of these reductionist representations, and their problematizations, is again the object of fierce political struggles. For instance, in the case of migrant representations in Europe, we can find the strong presence of racist voices, who rely heavily on the deployment of reductionist representations of an other, undermining their dignity and humanity. Even though mainstream media also contribute to the circulation of these representations—e.g., through the politics of citation—it is in particular non-curated online communication that renders these representations visible (see, e.g., Klein, 2017). To illustrate, we can cite Jakubowicz et al.'s (2017: v) opening sentences:

> Cyber racism, the spread of race hate speech through the Internet using the World Wide Web, has moved into centre stage in public debates across the world … Once considered a minor, if unfortunate, consequence of the freedom built into the Web, public concern has grown as those freedoms have magnified the impact of hate.

At the same time, these reductionist representations also become targeted by activist critique, who organize resistance against racist communication, but who also produce alternative communicative platforms within mainstream online platforms and through community and alternative media. Moreover, media still have to be able to play their watchdog role and protect their ability to exercise their criticality, which might also provoke discussions about the impact on, for instance, subgroup representations. This interplay has produced

an ongoing struggle about representation itself, which Jakubowicz et al. (2017: 196) summarize as follows, on the basis of their research in Australia:

> The struggle over what best represents a "true" Australian national identity is becoming increasingly visible in the digital realm. The spread of Facebook's social media pages has provided ideal locations for creative interpretations of Australia's history and identity to be constructed, refined and circulated.

These anti-racist struggles are also embedded in a wider societal process where the politics of recognition (Taylor, 1994) has come close to gaining prominence over the politics of redistribution (Fraser, 2000).[13] As Taylor (1994: 25—emphasis in original) writes:

> The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

Taylor's sceptical tone already indicates that the politics of recognition is a site of political struggle, in which media are also implicated. Media are platforms for these discursive struggles and simultaneously objects of critique, attempting to navigate a set of contradictory demands.

8.4. Degree of Participatory Intensities

The notion of equality also impacts the legitimization of participatory media processes, as all groups in society can be expected to have equal participation opportunities, including in the media field. From this perspective of democratic equality, it thus becomes important to provide the members of the political community with opportunities to communicate. One concept that captures this logic is the right to communicate—launched by D'Arcy (1969), as mentioned above—and referred to by Jacobson (1998) as a third-generation human right (see also Dakroury, 2009; Fisher and Harms, 1982; Padovani and Calabrese, 2014; Servaes, 1998). Media are important for the materialization of this "right to know and speak"—as Miller (2007: 35) defines cultural citizenship—as they often have the material infrastructure to enable it.

Despite the importance of the media's participatory role, participation in and through the media—to return to Carpentier's (2011a) distinction—remains a significant site of political struggle, in particular over the intensity of

the participatory practices, or whether they are more minimalist or more maximalist. Part of this struggle is situated at the rhetorical level, about whether participation is to be defined as 'taking part', or whether it is seen as 'sharing power' (Carpentier, 2017: 87ff.). When participation becomes conflated with interaction—as arguably happens in the former definition—then almost everything becomes participation, which often legitimates shying away from the more radical maximalist versions of participation. As Carpentier (2017: 90–91) writes, more minimalist versions of participation tend to protect the power positions of privileged (elite) actors, to the detriment of non-privileged (non-elite) actors, without totally excluding the latter. In contrast, more maximalist versions of participation approximate a full power equilibrium between all actors (which protects and empowers the non-privileged actors).

It is important to stress that this difference between minimalist and maximalist participation is not a dichotomy, but a dimension, with many in-between positions. This is where the notion of participatory intensity comes in, referring to the position(s) of the participatory process on the minimalist/maximalist dimension. Here, we should keep in mind that these participatory intensities can change over time (as they are an object of political struggle), but several components within one process can sometimes also yield differences (see Carpentier, 2016a). And maximalist participation plays a significant role in contemporary Western societies as a utopian horizon (Carpentier, 2014) but has turned out rather difficult to achieve and even more difficult to sustain.

Different media assemblages have different participatory affordances, which are part of these political struggles over participation. The creation of community and alternative media can explicitly be seen as interventions in these struggles, as they not only stressed the importance of community self-representation (which supports participation through the media) but also contested the privileged position of the media professional, instead arguing for the importance of 'ordinary' media producers. In particular, they critiqued the minimalist forms of participation that mainstream media allowed and, in response, developed a model of maximalist media participation. A clear example of these articulations can be found in the introduction to Girard's (1992: 2) *A Passion for Radio*, where he writes that community radio's "most distinguishing characteristic is its commitment to community participation at all levels … community radio listeners are the producers, managers, directors and even owners of the stations."

Also, online media can be seen as an intervention in this struggle over participatory intensities, as they made self-publishing and communicational exchanges (in their many forms) significantly easier. In addition to the increase in material possibilities for participation that digital media technologies provide, they are also (non-exclusive) instigators of changing relationships between institutionalized politics and citizens, and between media

assemblages, their signifying practices and their audiences, with media technologies becoming very much part of the audiences' everyday lives (Deuze, 2023).

Still, the domination of a few large conglomerates in the online communication field is an equally important factor in the struggle over participatory intensities. One element is that participation *in* (mainstream) social media assemblages is (very) minimalist. Moreover, participation has been transformed into a form of labour, which, as 'free labour', 'digital labour' or 'immaterial labour' (see Terranova, 2000) is a fundamental part of late capitalist societies and contributes to the creation of value, as has been addressed from a critical, predominantly Marxist perspective (Fuchs, 2010). Beneficiaries of user-generated content, apart from other users, are above all the companies that operate the (mainstream) online platforms—such as Meta Platforms Inc., X Corp. and Alphabet Inc.—as these user activities generate profits for these companies through advertising revenue (van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009), often at the expense of the privacy of users. Artificial intelligence (AI)[14] companies also have been analysed from this perspective, seen to be "extracting humanness" from "unwitting labourer[s]" for training AI (Morreale et al., 2023). The supposedly emancipatory moments linked to the participation of users are ultimately contrasted with the control exercised by the platforms. As a consequence, when discussing user-generated content, one is compelled to speak of heterogeneous power relations and practices that arise between users and companies, and not per se of empowerment only (van Dijck, 2009).

A final political struggle involves the uptake of participatory opportunities. Research on the acceptance and use of the more intensive forms of participation shows that, in general, the extension of participation opportunities—beyond the right to vote—is used especially by resource-rich sections of the population, i.e., by people who have, for example, financial capital, free time or higher education levels (e.g., van Ingen and van der Meer, 2011). This also tends to apply to media participation in general. Still, considerable parts of the population are left behind, hampered by digital divides[15] and despite some attempts to mobilize them. Here, too, there are major differences in acceptance and use, even though digital formats attempt to be more inclusive in terms of time allocation, cost or accessibility. Moreover, the expansion of media participation opportunities alone does not automatically lead to broad political involvement, as, for instance, participation in digital protest activities is not always indicative of intense political mobilization (as the term 'slacktivism' signifies). A similar point can be made about maximalist participation *in* (alternative) media assemblages, which is practised and defended by small groups with often technologically highly skilled members, struggling to include more people with different backgrounds.

At the same time, we need to be careful not to discredit these more maximalist positions, or discredit (online) media participation as a whole (as, e.g.,

the concept of 'dark participation' risks doing—see Ribeiro et al., 2019: 10). Also, we should keep in mind Dahlgren's (2004: 7) argument that the political interest of most individuals has not been erased; rather, their understanding of politics merely shifted and "[they] developed other modes of political engagement." Hence, especially among young individuals, a different political awareness and understanding of participation remains observable through their media practices (e.g., Bennett, 2008; Olsson and Dahlgren, 2010), which implies that the struggle over these participatory intensities is very much ongoing.

9. Conditions of Possibility for Media's Democratic Roles

Media assemblages do not function in isolation, and in order to perform their democratic roles, a series of conditions of possibility need to be fulfilled. Sometimes these discursive and material requirements are taken for granted, but, at the same time, these (infra)structural and cultural components are indispensable. In the case of resources, we move into the more material realm, with a discussion on the role of technology, but also the organizational infrastructures that harbour them. A similar point can be made for the regulatory role of the state, but here we add a discursive element through the emphasis on its legitimacy. Finally, the presence of a democratic media culture, as a third condition of possibility, brings in an even stronger discursive component.

9.1. Resources: Communication Technologies and Infrastructures

Media have always been closely linked to technical developments, with their particular affordances (Norman, 1988), and these technologies play a crucial role—as conditions of possibility—in allowing and disallowing media's democratic roles. Still, we should be careful not to isolate technologies from the societies in which they are embedded. Stiegler's (1998: 82) brief definition of technology, as "organized inorganic matter," already gives a first idea about how broad the field of technology is, but also how it intersects with human activity. Another example is Derry and Williams's (1970: 3) definition of technology as "that bewilderingly varied body of knowledge and devices by which man [sic] progressively masters his natural environment." Technology—in the media field—can thus be understood as intersecting sets of enablers that have significant impact on the possibilities of conception, production, bundling, distribution and reception of media's signifying practices, but it is not outside the societal context with, for instance, its (dis)appreciations, required skills and knowledges and organizational assemblages in which it is articulated. Volti's (2006: 6) definition of technology places even more emphasis on this societal component when he writes that technology is "a system that uses knowledge and organization to produce objects and

techniques for the attainment [of] specific goals." He continues by emphasizing the embeddedness of technology in the social, avoiding deterministic positions (see also Williams, 1990): "New technologies bring changes to many aspects of society, while at the same time social forces do much to stimulate and shape these technologies" (Volti, 2006: 272). As Broich (2015: 238) comments, we have seen considerable change in the past decades, at technological and infrastructural levels:

> Technology has always played an important role in the development of the mass media industry, but it is hard to deny that the advent of the digital age has accelerated change and innovation in the sector and significantly altered the way businesses and consumers act and interact.

This discussion also implies that (media) technologies are not neutral: One example is Guins's (2008: 15) statement:

> Neoliberal control strategies are enacted and mediated through a range of devices, techniques, and practices that seek to regulate media and the subject of rule through "empowered" practices with media technologies. In doing so, a liberal humanist understanding of technology is upheld that relies on an instrumentalist view of technology that renders all technology as neutral means, or "tools," for the realization of some human ends.

Media technologies are the objects of hegemonic projects that (aim to) fixate their meanings, and that aim to normalize these always particular meanings. Here, the discourse of neutrality can be seen as a discursive tool to serve this post-political strategy. Media technologies are rigidly embedded in societal contexts, and in this sense, they are never neutral. But the identities of technologies, whether or not their identities have been rigidly fixated by a hegemonic project, can always become re-articulated, and their materialities and usages can be altered. This implies that media technologies can become positioned and used in ways that move outside the dominant (or hegemonic) definitions. From this perspective, media technologies are contingent and open to re-articulation and reusage. Illustrations are provided by alternative and community media, which show that audio-visual media technologies can be used in ways that transcend the use that was made of them by mainstream media organizations. Media technologies might not be neutral, but their signification might be altered, pushing them into other (but still equally particular and non-neutral) positions. Moreover, we should also not ignore the materiality of media technologies (or user practices). This could lead to the problematic belief that any media technology can equally serve any kind of purpose. Technologies incorporate specific codes that allow them to do

specific things, and not to do others. As we already mentioned, they have affordances (Norman, 1988), qualities that allow for actions.

If we try to combine these different arguments, we can see that there is an oscillation of media technologies between contingency and rigidity, where the discursive fixates the identities of technologies but also allows them to become unfixed. Similarly, the materiality of media technologies allows many different (sometimes unforeseen) usages but also introduces a certain level of rigidity, not allowing for other particular usages. Still—and despite these complexities—(media) technologies remain very necessary for media's democratic roles to be performed, which renders their existence a condition of possibility.

(Media) technology, as a condition of possibility, also intersects with technologies' embeddedness in particular infrastructures, which complicates how they can become activated to support media's democratic roles. Technologies are, for instance, often commodities, and their availability also depends on the economic value that is ascribed to them. Not very long ago, audio-visual recording equipment was extremely expensive and not even considered consumption technology. The current lower access costs combined with the widespread use of digital technologies mean that it is relatively easy for anyone to produce and distribute signifying practices. From a more organizational perspective, technologies are integrated into organizational contexts that, in turn, function in capitalist settings. This, in practice, implies that media technologies are embedded in economic logics, with their production and distribution costs, management and marketing efforts, and resource-generation requirements. A few of the recent changes bear evidence of this: The 'long tail effect' (Anderson, 2007), for instance, now makes it worthwhile to offer niche products (which have relatively low demand), as online provision and distribution costs for digital media products are also low. Furthermore, digital content can be categorized and recompiled relatively easily so that the content can be adapted to individual needs with little effort and can be utilized multiple times.

However, these economic processes of increased volume are contrasted by the tendency for concentration when it comes to the media assemblages themselves. Globally, there are only a limited number of large corporations that dominate the online markets, and both regulate access to the internet and structure the communication possibilities of users: First and foremost, there are the companies of Meta Platforms Inc., Alphabet Inc., X Corp., Amazon.com Inc. and Apple Inc., which operate brands/platforms such as Facebook, X and Google. Products and services from Google, Facebook or X benefit from large numbers of users, which in turn increases the relevance for their users as well as for their advertisers. With the achievement of a critical mass, a spiral has been set in motion that further expands the advantage for the respective companies and leads to a self-reinforcing dynamic. One of the consequences is that public service media become increasingly exposed

to hostility, as they are seen as an obstacle to market expansion, while community and alternative media are facing significant problems in remaining economically sustainable (see also Section 10).

Given the dominance of capitalist logics, a stable economy for its media assemblages—together with political and social stability (see also below)—remains an important condition of possibility for media to exercise their democratic roles. Additionally, even though libertarian voices would contest this, there is a continued need for government involvement in limiting the monopolistic tendencies in the media markets and for government involvement in protecting non-market media, either through direct financial support, as is the case with public service media in many European countries, or through regulatory initiatives that acknowledge and protect the existence of non-market media, such as community media. One example of the latter is the 2009 *Declaration of the Committee of Ministers on the Role of Community Media in Promoting Social Cohesion and Intercultural Dialogue*, where the Council of Europe (2009) emphasizes the role of community media in stimulating political (macro-)participation and enhancing democratic learning.

9.2. Democratic Media Culture: Freedom, Equality and Pluralism

A second, more discursive condition of possibility is the validation of a series of value-discourses that together constitute a democratic media culture. When a particular society, or a considerable portion of this society, no longer accepts the core democratic value-discourses, also in relation to the media field, media cannot fulfil their democratic roles. In the discussion on threats to democracy (Section 4), we already discussed the tendency of power holders to (further) re-centralize power and to move towards forms of illiberal-democratic or authoritarian regimes, thus reducing the importance of freedom and equality. This is connected to (and supported by) the construction of the Self as homogeneous, and the elimination of pluralism. If we take, for instance, the work of Carl Schmitt, who contributed to providing a legal-theoretical base for the Nazi ideology (as one of the so-called '*Schreibtischtäter*'), and his critique of liberalism, we can find this rejection of pluralism (and celebration of homogeneity). To use Mouffe's (2005: 14—emphasis in original) summary of Schmitt's ideas:

> we need to part company with Schmitt, who was adamant that there is no place for pluralism inside a democratic political community. Democracy, as he understood it, requires the existence of an homogeneous *demos*, and this precludes any possibility of pluralism.

This more general democratic threat also impacts the position that media (can) take, as media then risk becoming articulated as instruments for

illiberal-democratic or authoritarian regimes (and their affiliated parts of civil society) in order to achieve these regimes' discursive-ideological objectives, as a contribution to *their* struggle for hegemony. This implies that value-discourses such as media freedom, media pluralism and (with it) the core idea of equality, are weakened and ultimately rejected, replaced by regime loyalty and homogeneity. Also in political practice, we can see that media freedom is coming under pressure—on the one hand for economic reasons, but also, and very clearly, for political reasons. In the EU, at the moment of writing, Hungary in particular stands out (while the situation in Poland has improved during the past years, though concerns about Slovakia are mounting). But media freedom is also under pressure everywhere where journalists are coerced and threatened, which has been occurring all over Europe (see Section 10), and several European countries have limited the diversity of voices and (media) organizations, for instance, in response to the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Arguably, the existence of a democratic media culture is a requirement that protects against these threats. This condition of possibility thus implies that there is broad societal support for the (key) value-discourses of freedom, equality, dignity and pluralism, in their non-absolutist articulations, also in relation to the functioning of the diversity of media active in the media landscape. This, in turn, requires the consistent circulation and legitimation of discourses about freedom, equality, dignity and pluralism, validating them as societally beneficial. Here, media assemblages, but also organizations such as journalists' unions, together with actors from the educational, political and legal fields, have substantial roles to play. Second, a democratic media culture also requires an active defence of these value-discourses, as there are frequent threats to them. This requirement implies a willingness to act, but also the instruments to react. One example here is the European Union's response to the restrictions imposed on the media in Hungary and Poland. Wójcik (2022) describes this response as follows:

> Other than monitoring the violations of media freedom and pluralism in the two Visegrad states the EU's response has been limited to some action in the scope of the Article 7 Rule of Law procedure against Hungary, and a single EU law infringement action against the Hungarian government contesting the media regulator's independence and accusing it of discriminatory action following its decision not to renew the license of independent radio broadcaster Klubrádió.

Finally, a democratic media culture also requires the performance of these value-discourses, for instance, through the production of fair, respectful and dignified representations, and the avoidance of othering and stereotyping. This implies a 'living' political culture in which all actors are prepared

to take note of the positions of others, to respect them (and their dignity) and to engage with them (Gastil, 2008). The latter is important, following Habermas's deliberative theory of democracy, as communicative engagement is more than merely having the bodies and voices of speakers and listeners present. It requires active engagement with the other to trigger subject- and opinion-transformative (learning) processes, allowing for an attempt to generate "intuitive constitutional consensus" (Habermas, 2022: 150), even when this consensus might always be imperfect.

9.3. The Legitimacy of Democratic State Regulation as Counterweight

In Section 1, about the core elements of democracy, we argued that in contemporary democracies, the position of the state has become hegemonic, and thus an indispensable defining element of democracy itself. In the previous subsection, we already discussed the scenario where states—controlled by illiberal-democratic or authoritarian regimes and their affiliated parts of civil society—act against the media's democratic roles, but in this subsection, we want to emphasize the importance of the regulatory efforts of democratic states, embedded in the rule of law, in relation to the media assemblages. Our argument here is that the acceptance of these regulatory efforts—or, in other words, their legitimacy—is another condition of possibility for the media's democratic roles to exist and to be performed.

The history of (European) democracies is closely linked to the history of the creation of procedures that guarantee, for instance, the circulation of reliable information while respecting freedom of expression. This has been achieved through the regulation of audio-visual and printed media assemblages, which made it possible to protect these freedoms. The acceptance of these regulatory interventions—their legitimacy—as part of the rule of law is arguably a necessary requirement, allowing for the legal protection of media's democratic roles and supporting the stability that the rule of law brings.

At the same time, the democratic legitimacy of the state (as regulator) is also grounded in the ability to show restraint. Partially, this implies the absence of direct interventions, replaced by a reliance on, and the stimulation of, self-regulation, and the respect for the organizational autonomy of media assemblages, including public service media (not reducing them to government/state media). Still, in the case of public service media, more direct interventions exist, for instance through the formulation of performance indicators linked to financial support, which opens up opportunities for government pressure.

Even though the legitimacy of regulatory interventions remains a condition of possibility, their articulation, their limits and their reach are not necessarily stable. For instance, the rise of global media has necessitated the

extension of the reach of media regulation (beyond a single state's jurisdiction). As Croteau and Hoynes (2018: 529) write:

> whereas national governments usually create and enforce regulations, by definition, global media cross these boundaries (Sreberny 2005), posing regulatory challenges for national governments (Calabrese, 1999; Price, 2002).

Or in Stein and Sinha's (2006: 426) words: "Yet, global communication systems challenge the ability of nation-states to regulate effectively and to exercise their sovereignty." Croteau and Hoynes (2018) argue that there are three reasons for these regulatory difficulties, namely the pressure from global media conglomerates, the impact of global 'free trade' agreements and the "borderless nature of the internet" (Croteau and Hoynes, 2018: 530).

These problematics take us back to the ideological-discursive struggle between the 'free flow of information' and the 'free and balanced flow of information', with the latter defended by the Non-Aligned Movement, as part of the struggle in the 1970s over the New International Economic Order (NIEO) and the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) (see The MacBride Commission, 1980: 36). Given the hegemonic role of the state, the possibilities for developing more global regulatory frameworks are limited in scope, though. Stein and Sinha (2006: 426) mention three strategies: "the harmonization of domestic laws among nations," "treaty negotiations among countries" and "the overall development of global communication systems," but simultaneously stress that "scholarship suggests that these policies require a socially agreed set of principles at their core," where in particular the latter strategy would require the construction of new legitimacies for global regulation (which is part of the political struggle over media freedom; see Section 8).

10. Threats to Media's Democratic Roles

This section looks at the threats to media's democratic roles and the possible implications of these threats for democracy as a whole. Again, these threats all have their discursive and material components, although some threats, namely economic sustainability and the colonization of the public sphere, have stronger material components, while the other three which we will discuss here—disenchantment and lack of trust, the transformation of political knowledge and the increase of symbolic violence and polarization—have stronger discursive components.

Moreover, some of these threats are old, with some of the newer ones connected to different—and interrelated—contemporary transformations (see in more detail, Blumler, 2018; Dahlgren, 2018), without losing sight of the

importance and persistence of the older threats (in intersection with the more novel ones). In some cases, (newer) threats are even considered imminent, which activates the use of a crisis discourse (see, e.g., Chadwick, 2018; Imhof, 2011), as has been the case with the digital transformation of media. At the same time, we wish to—at least partially—distance ourselves from an exclusive focus on the digital—and on imminent crises—and prefer to consider the threats to media's democratic roles that are more structural and long-term.

10.1. The Lack of Economic Sustainability

The way media assemblages are embedded in a capitalist media system has an impact on their capacity to fulfil their democratic roles, as the media's existence may be threatened by the lack of economic sustainability. Some media organizations, e.g., community and alternative media, which often function outside market logics, are particularly vulnerable. Community and alternative media organizations—as non-profit organizations that still have to function in a capitalist context—need access to material resources for their continued existence, a situation that is in many cases deeply problematic (Myers, 2011: 18; Carpentier, 2017: 130). Although they often function with low budgets, they remain dependent on raising sufficient financial resources, which might complicate or jeopardize the realization of their participatory-democratic remit.

Similarly, public service media (see Campos-Freire et al., 2021: 132ff.) have also faced economic hardship, with their recourses depending on government support and public resources. Herzog et al. (2018: 3) start their introductory chapter with the sentence: "Public service media (PSM) organizations across the globe are under pressure." They continue that public service media funding "decreases or becomes increasingly contestable," adding that "Financing public broadcasting has always been a challenging and often controversial issue for policy-makers" (Herzog et al., 2018: 3). Karadimitriou (2022: 41) makes a similar analysis:

> The sustainability of public service broadcasting has proved a perennial issue with challenges succeeding one another (commercialization of the media field, digitalisation of communications, long-lasting problem of excessive politicisation and, recently, the rise of platformisation of communication).

Finally, traditional mainstream market media assemblages have not escaped from sustainability problems either, with decreasing advertising revenues and shrinking audience markets (e.g., Newman et al., 2019; Klopfenstein Frei et al., 2024). In particular, regional newspapers have been facing serious sustainability issues, which is not without consequences for the degree of local

and regional political information available to many citizens. Job security for journalists also remains problematic, and these "precarious labour conditions constitute a major threat to the democratic performance of leading news media" (Trappel and Tomaz, 2021: 428). Still, many "media managed to cope with the digital challenge and found ways to maintain their performative strengths despite economic, political, and technical challenges" (Trappel and Tomaz, 2021: 426).

While print capitalism turned the majority of the population into (potential) readers, the transition to digital capitalism again changed reading practices. Structural changes related to the digital have also affected newsrooms—not least due to increased competitive pressure and declining advertising revenues. This has firstly changed the forms of production (with the integration of digital technology in media production practice) and distribution (with the—at least partial—move from print to online platforms). Secondly, market media's business models also had to be adjusted. Thirdly, the role and status of journalism itself also changed, as the difficult revenue opportunities are tempting large media companies to turn away from journalism and to shift their activities to more lucrative areas.

In response to the economic pressure on journalism, alternative forms of financing such as crowdfunding, foundation financing and state subsidies have been considered, but, at this stage, they have not proven sufficient to support professional journalism and resolve this "historic challenge" for journalism (Bunz, 2009). In response to these challenges, the idea of journalism as a public good, which needs public support and should not be left at the mercy of market forces, has been gaining strength. One example is UNESCO's (2022: 24) *Journalism Is a Public Good* report, which also argues that "fact-based information is vitally important as an essential service, especially in times of crisis." One of the answers the report gives to the future of journalism question is to argue for "[a]n arsenal of policies and innovative practices," including "changes by news producers, direct and indirect public financing for trusted news outlets, enhanced support for public service media, tax incentives for non-profit news outlets, and a redoubling of ODA and philanthropic investments in news production" (UNESCO, 2022: 43).

10.2. The Colonization of the Public Sphere

The centralization of power also impacts the media field and its democratic roles, as control over these signifying machines is a vital instrument of power. Control over media assemblages allows for more selective information distribution, for a watchdog that turns a blind eye, but also for the transformation of media into propaganda machines. In more theoretical terms (see Habermas, 1987) we can refer to these power centralization processes as the colonization

of the life world—and more particularly, the public sphere—by the systems of the state and the market.

Attempts to gain control over the media originate from political actors, but also from economic actors, for only partially overlapping reasons. Media ownership in capitalist societies sometimes translates into opinion power, as we argued before. Moreover, in the media landscape, we are confronted with concentration tendencies, which might not only cause economic dysfunctions but also reduce discursive-ideological diversity. Papathanassopoulos et al. (2023: 58) suggest an increase in these concentration levels:

> The liberalization of the rules governing the media systems in general and television sector around the globe in the last three decades has facilitated, if not accelerated, the trend toward the creation of larger and fewer dominant groups in the entire media sector. As a result, the media industry has become more concentrated and populated by multimedia conglomerates.

Different policies exist to (attempt to) protect both internal and external pluralism, but this remains an ongoing political struggle (see Section 8). Moreover, within media organizations, media owners have a documented history of interference, leading authors such as Schlesinger (1987) to talk about the micro-myth of journalistic autonomy. As Zielonka (2015: 6–7) summarizes this: "Media owned by local oligarchs are not necessarily expected to generate financial profits, but to help their owner's other businesses and also to enhance their political influence."

Also, the excessive control over media by political actors is a considerable threat to the media's democratic role, as information quality, the representation of societal diversity, the watchdog role and people's participation become curtailed. In a European context, these discussions are partially (but not exclusively) connected to the rise of so-called illiberal democracies with more authoritarian tendencies. Voltmer (2015: 217) writes: "Populism, illiberal politics, the politicization of the media, and widespread attack journalism are recurrent problems that seem to prevent these countries from developing mature political cultures." Of course, in some cases—as the existence of media oligarchs in some European countries demonstrates—political and economic control overlaps.

One particular focal point of these dynamics of control relates to the internet. In its early days, much hope was placed on its democratic capacities. Ideas of a free, decentralized and self-regulated internet that would largely manage without state intervention were high on the agenda of socio-political debates. For instance, on the fringes of the World Economic Forum in Davos in 1996, John Perry Barlow, one of the founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, formulates a Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace with remarkable

pathos and a vague 'we', which links the claim of self-regulation of the internet with a radical anti-statist position:

> Governments of the Industrial World, you weary giants of flesh and steel, I come from Cyberspace, the new home of Mind. On behalf of the future, I ask you of the past to leave us alone. You are not welcome among us. You have no sovereignty where we gather … We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.
>
> (Barlow, 1996)

These signifying practices articulated a mixture of liberal-emancipatory visions of design and a technology-deterministic framework, but also market-oriented views—by now considered typical for the Californian ideology. They produced a powerful discourse in the following decades (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996; Turner, 2006)—later complemented by ideas about the sovereignty and creative capacity of users in Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005).

Today, the internet and its corporate platforms have indeed impacted the economy, politics, media and society—albeit in significantly different directions than initially hoped for. The most striking development of the past three decades also constitutes a threat: the large-scale commercial appropriation and private-sector takeover of large parts of the internet; some refer to this process explicitly as the colonization of the internet (Fuchs, 2011: 318; McChesney, 2013: 97; Siapera and Veikou, 2016: 44). In the meantime, the internet is characterized by the presence of a multitude of corporate platforms that offer specialized consumption-related services (e.g., travel bookings, accommodation agencies, delivery services, music and video-on-demand services or shopping portals), but above all by a few social media and messaging platforms, through which essential parts of online-based communication are organized and structured. Driven in large part by technology companies, this process took place largely unhindered by governmental-regulatory interventions in Europe, at least until the second half of the 2010s.

With their platforms and technologies, corporations such as Amazon.com Inc., Apple Inc., Alphabet Inc., X Corp., Meta Platforms Inc. and Microsoft Corp. have centralized the essential technical infrastructures and services of the internet, which are not only used by private users but also by many companies and public institutions. This centralization (or monopolization) constitutes a threat, as a limited number of private-sector actors with quasi-sovereign powers control the central access points to the internet, structure and observe users' possibilities of movement, and filter and curate content, information flows and discussions on their platforms. Moreover, they monitor

and commodify (traces of) individual behaviour and social relationships (Zuboff, 2019).

The threat of the colonization of the internet not only consists of the (quasi-)monopoly of these main corporations, though. Equally threatening is the dominance of the market logic as a whole, which has opened up the internet to large-scale commodification processes and has relegated non-market actors (and platforms) to the outskirts of the internet. Even though alternative (online) media have maintained a presence, and decentralized material articulations of social networks (e.g., the Fediverse—see Anderlini and Milani, 2022) exist, their ability to create alternative discursive and material practices remains limited, and the threat of one particular logic—that of the market—dominating the internet remains real.

Interestingly, until the second half of the 2010s, the EU hardly responded to this threat of colonization, privatization, commercialization and marketization of the internet (van Dijck et al., 2018), and their consequences for the economy and society. Eventually, in the early 2020s, EU regulation was implemented, with, for instance, the Digital Markets Act (2022), the Digital Services Act (2022), the European Media Freedom Act (2023) and the EU Artificial Intelligence Act (2024) (European Union, 2022a, 2022b, 2023, 2024).

10.3. Disenchantment and Lack of Trust

Non-participation is one of the threats that can affect democracy as a whole (see Section 4) as the withdrawal of a too substantial part of the population, or of some of its particular subgroups, jeopardizes the very core principle of democratic participation (always to be seen as complemented by representation). This argument also applies to participation in the public sphere; here too, a withdrawal of citizens from the public sphere is considered problematic.

One type of argument is driven by the media critique on the cultural industry and the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1998, 2005), which argues that mainstream media assemblages are more forces of distraction than forces of democracy. Debord (1998: II)—reflecting on his own 1967 book *The Society of the Spectacle*—captures this book's main thrust by saying it is a critique of "the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign." This type of argumentation is part of a longer tradition that accused mainstream media assemblages of playing an alienating role, dissuading members of the political community from being political in the first place. This was often connected to the (screen) entertainment industry, where the screen was seen to generate passive audience members, becoming fascinated by the pleasure offered by the screen and (made) disinterested in the world outside.

But social media have also been critiqued from this perspective,[16] as the commodification of users (and their data) is seen as alienating. For instance, Proulx et al. (2011: 23) write that "the Internet is transforming ordinary users into active, consenting participants in their own alienation by consumer society." Also, Stiegler (2009: 47—emphasis removed) makes a similar point when he writes that "every epoch of grammatization—of which YouTube is one of the later cases …—constitutes a major turn in the cultural hegemony and the poisonous heteronomy imposed by the consumerist industrialization of culture." More cynical analyses of social media argue that the 'endless chatter' on social media offers 'preoccupations' that prevent citizens from engaging in other societal fields, where their interventions might be more effective.[17] Social media thus also come to be seen as a part of a politics of distraction (Weiskel, 2005). In addition to these more media-centric discussions on alienation, there are also broader approaches that point to the limited time and resources that citizens have to invest in political activity (mediated or not) because of alienation processes in other societal fields. If people have to be primarily concerned with their basic survival, and with generating sufficient income to pay for a more or less decent living, then entertainment might be particularly welcomed, while little time and energy might be left for democratic concerns.

Apart from these often deeply materialist analyses of (mainstream) media, there are also analyses that point to the more discursive and affective dimensions. One of the elements here is the lack of trust in media (with analyses often grounded in quantitative surveys). For instance, the EBU (2020) report on trust and media—based on Eurobarometer data—shows the presence of this distrust, but also that there are considerable differences among the European countries. Countries such as Finland, Albania and the Netherlands have their 'low trust' category around 20%, while in the UK, Spain, North Macedonia and Greece, the 'low trust' category is over 50% in size. The average of the 28 EU countries is 40%, which implies that a substantial part of the European population reports limited trust in media. More detailed analyses also indicate that trust in social media is considerably lower than trust in more traditional media, while the national parliaments and governments, and political parties in particular, are trusted even less. These individualized (and aggregated) statements of distrust have also condensed into discourses of distrust, which offer frameworks of intelligibility for these more individual positions, and which can (potentially) threaten the media's democratic roles. As Henke et al. (2020: 299) write:

> The widespread public discourse about fake news, alternative facts, and an arising post-truth era seem to be a particularly alarming indication for an increasingly dysfunctional relationship between news media and its audience.

Related to the lack of trust, non-participation in media assemblages also connects to disenchantment and powerlessness. It is a situation where engagement is lost. Coleman and Ross (2010: 154) discuss what they call a "glaring paradox of contemporary democracies," related to participation in the public sphere: Although audiences have more communicative possibilities than ever to "question their rulers; challenge official information; contribute to mainstream media; produce their own media and speak for themselves," at the same time there is an increasing disenchantment not only with politics but also with media—"feeling distant from elites; ignored by the media; unheard by representatives; constrained in public speech and utterly frustrated by the promises of democracy" (Coleman and Ross, 2010: 154). Carpentier (2018: v) points to a similar paradox, namely that of

> the growing levels of participation in a variety of societal fields and the decreasing levels of control over the levers of societal power … I believe we need to heed this paradox much more as a paradox, as a seemingly contradictory statement. We need to take both components of the paradox serious, acknowledge that there is a history of coexistence combined with a present-day intensification, and scrutinize how they dynamically and contingently relate to each other. In other words, we need to gain a better understanding of how we now live in the era of the both.

In particular, social media assemblages hold the promise of resolving these paradoxes, but similar to democracy, this promise remains partially unfulfilled, which in turn can cause frustration (see Carpentier, 2014). Part of the frustration is related to the limits of participation *through* social media (e.g., in the field of institutionalized politics), with, for instance, Chen et al. (2019: 1670) pointing to the "discouraging effects of low-quality content." Because of this, "the information-oriented use of social media may not be able to promote participation" (Chen et al., 2019: 1670). They also point to the abundance of a wide range of different signifying practices, which facilitates the avoidance of political signifying practices, as those "who lack an interest in politics can easily avoid political news and quickly get access to that which interests them instead" (Chen et al., 2019: 1671). Yet another frustration is triggered by the always lacking skills and knowledge to operate (social) media technologies, which also have their own agencies. Finally, the sometimes-unpleasant communicative styles used online, and the risks of publicness for those who actively engage, can limit participation through social media assemblages. But there are also limits to participation *in* social media assemblages. Schmidt (2013) calls this a "participation paradox": Although social media assemblages may enable new forms of participation through offering citizens communicative platforms, they close themselves off from more maximalist-participatory forms of user (self-)administration or (self-)

determination. Moreover, as mentioned before, we should remain aware that the digital divide(s) has (have) not been closed and that for many, access to, and interactions on/through, online media—not to mention participation in (or through) online media—is still hampered.

10.4. The Transformation of Political Knowledge

As signifying machines, media assemblages also contribute to the distribution and production of those discourses about/from the political field that are considered legitimate and truthful—what we here call 'political knowledge'. Arguably, a series of differentiation and re-institutionalization processes, which have transformed the contemporary media landscape, have impacted this construction of political knowledge, contributing—in a non-exclusive way—to the transformation of political knowledge itself. Even though transformations as such are not to be considered problematic, the weakening trustworthiness of political signifying practices still poses a key threat to the media's democratic roles, jeopardizing each of the five roles we distinguished.

At the production side, we see that journalism's struggles for sustainability and the marketization of the public sphere (see the previous subsections) contribute to this weakening, even though "there is more political information out there than ever" (Van Aelst et al., 2017: 7). Still, online signifying practices of even the more established media companies operate more in line with an economic logic than is the case with their 'offline offerings', and topicality as a news selection criterion has gained further importance in relation to relevance, supported by the systematic practice of audience monitoring. Even if one needs to be careful with arguing for a universal decline of journalistic quality, journalisms that lean towards what is new and appealing, and less towards what is politically important (see Wolin, 2008: 7ff.), have gained a substantial presence. Moreover, as online media's signifying practices potentially have a global circulation, audiences are exposed to very different articulations of diversity, freedom of expression and democracy, often without these articulations being rendered explicit, which can allow for less (democratically) desirable signifying practices to circulate.

The comparatively decreased—although still highly relevant—importance of journalistic curation (or gatekeeping) in online media has intensified the knowledge construction problem. Partially, this is caused by the entry of border crossers into the media landscape, such as influencers and political activists—or 'strangers' and 'interloper media', as Wunderlich et al. (2022: 571) label them. These border crossers are difficult to classify, but sometimes they (try to) profit from the credibility bonus of professional journalism by imitating its characteristics without replicating its journalistic quality standards. Meanwhile, professional journalism has responded to these identity threats by creating stricter demarcations, doing boundary work (Lewis, 2012) vis-à-vis

(potential) competitors, but the uncertainty about which media assemblages to trust—especially from a user perspective—remains.

More generally, the opportunities for generating non-journalistically curated signifying practices are sometimes—but certainly not always—a gateway into one-sided, insincere or manipulative forms of communication, possibly grounded in sophisticated surveillance practices and generated and/or distributed by bots. The decentralized nature of online communication has thus opened up new possibilities for surveillance (Zuboff, 2019), triggering a political struggle about which knowledge can be legitimately gathered and stored—for manipulation and propaganda[18] (Benkler et al., 2018; Bennett and Livingston, 2018) and for the circulation of erroneous information (or misinformation, see Applebaum, 2018). In particular, the dissemination of propaganda has come within reach of many actors, a process that sometimes is called—with some irony—the democratization of propaganda (Carpentier, 2022: 74; Woolley and Howard, 2018: 191). However, this does not imply that political actors have shied away from deploying propaganda, as the discussion on post-truth indicates (Ball, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Henke et al., 2020). Now originating from many different actors, propaganda (which includes disinformation) and misinformation have arguably gained in presence, as, for instance, Van Aelst et al. (2017: 16) write: "there does appear to be an increase in the supply of misinformation or 'factitious informational blends' (Rojecki and Meraz, 2016) circulating in political information environments."

This also implies that—apart from the entrance of new human actors into the media landscape—new technologies have also entered the stage as actors, particularly in the form of AI. Even though the discussion on the (lack of) neutrality of technology (and its complexities) also applies here (see Section 9), there are nevertheless reasons for (democratic) concern, as poorly or maliciously used AI may negatively affect the quality of political information (and knowledge). Still, it is important to stress that AI can provide relevant support with a considerable number of tasks, for instance, when applied in journalism, as Lin and Lewis (2022: 1635; see also Marconi, 2020) argue. At the same time, the generation of (news) texts through software produces uncertainty with regard to authorship, trust and quality. For instance, it is striking that Lin and Lewis (2022: 1635) use the concept of "good journalistic AI," which acts as a marker for quality issues, as "bad journalistic AI" (or badly used journalistic AI) may result in the publication of journalistic texts that are problematic in nature, which may in turn impact the knowledge produced about a particular topic. Likewise, the affordances of AI to produce convincing but fabricated representations of political (or other) actors (e.g., the so-called deepfakes) only increase these uncertainties.

These transformation processes impact how political knowledge is interpreted and used by its audiences, who have to navigate through highly complex media landscapes. This renders it challenging for audiences to compile a comprehensive and plausible picture of reality, of dominant positions and

important arguments, from endlessly flowing streams of communication. It has become more difficult to assess the quality and truthfulness of signifying practices, especially on the internet. For instance, the politics of the number on the internet—where small numbers of people speak very loudly, claiming representativeness—make evaluating the weight of statements more difficult. Also, the material availability of AI tools to generate fictitious signifying practices, which require (at least some) effort to distinguish them from signifying practices vetted as authentic, contributes to these difficulties. Secondly, as we already argued, the opportunities (and willingness) for distributing/producing propaganda (or interest-based communication) have increased. More structurally: The boundaries between different realms and fields have become more permeable or blurred, including those between large and small public spheres, between the private and the public, between privacy and publicness, between media genres, between journalistic areas, between news and non-news (Bengtsson, 2023), between journalism and advertising, between actors with professional identities and the audience (labelled 'produsers'), and between humans and machines.

For audiences, one consequence is that it has now become easier to "opt out of news and only consume the non-political content they prefer" (Van Aelst et al., 2017: 5; see also Prior, 2007), which causes a "concern that the demand for – or use of – political news is declining" (Van Aelst et al., 2017: 7), especially among those with lower educational levels and less political interest. This type of concern aligns with the threat of non-participation, which we discussed in the previous subsection, where frustration and disenchantment with the political and media fields trigger a withdrawal from political news, which hampers the media's informational role and democracy as a whole. Secondly, there is also concern about the impact of filter bubbles, where information becomes adjusted to individual preferences. This is further strengthened by an apparent "public demand for biased information" (Van Aelst et al., 2017: 15). While ideological influences on (political) news consumption are hardly new, a too strong segregation of ideological spheres limits the democratic forum role and the confrontation with a diversity of viewpoints. Thirdly, when plausible facts become the object of public debate, controversy and delusion-driven revisions (e.g., through so-called 'conspiracy theories', see Butter and Knight, 2020) and dis/misinformation saturate the information landscapes, stimulated by (often populist) political interventions, the ground for the construction of political knowledge becomes unstable, which further threatens the media's democratic roles. As Arendt puts it: "What is at stake here is … common and factual reality itself, and this is indeed a political problem of the first order" (Arendt, 1967, cited in Van Aelst et al., 2017: 14).

At the same time, the opportunities for irony and playfulness, for parody and for not taking the political always seriously (see, e.g., Wimmer, 2005), and for participation have still increased, which might also be beneficial, as long as the members of the political community have the media and information

literacy skills to distinguish between the many different communicative styles and intentions, to appreciate and understand them and to navigate through these more complex knowledge environments. Without these skills, grounded in communicative ethics, the current more postmodern media landscape, with its many contradictions and hybridities, might pose a considerable threat to democracy.

10.5. The Increase of Symbolic Violence and Polarization

Communicational exchanges—as such, vital to democracy—can be structured in many different ways, including harmful ways. As we have mentioned earlier, the logics of antagonism and agonism—but also synergism—can all be used to organize public communication. While agonism defines the other as adversary, and synergism creates a chain of equivalence between other and self, in the case of antagonism, the other becomes defined as an enemy, in need of eradication. Through this process, the self becomes radically differentiated from the enemy, and homogenized, united against the enemy (Carpentier, 2017: 172). Antagonism can be materialized through material and/or symbolic violence, through the material destruction of body and voice, and/or the discursive silencing of the other.

Antagonism and violence, in their many different forms, can threaten the media's democratic role. Material violence within, or against, media assemblages and/or their journalists, in the context of Europe, is relatively rare, but it does occur. Several types of contexts can be distinguished, including terrorist violence against media, with the attack on the French satirical weekly newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*, on 7 January 2015, as an iconic example. More recently, Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2023) expressed concerns about the safety of Russian journalists who have fled to Europe after the reported poisoning attempt of Elena Kostyuchenko, who had covered the Russian-Ukrainian war for the investigative newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*. The coverage of the war in Ukraine has also proven lethal for journalists; three out of four media staff reported as killed in 2023 and 2024 on the Safety of Journalists Platform[19] were killed in Ukraine. Journalists have also been targeted by other actors, outside warzones, as the assassinations of the Slovak journalist Ján Kuciak and the Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia illustrate. Both were investigating "ties between government officials and criminal groups" (Hajdari, 2023). Less lethal forms of violence have also been used, with, for instance, the use of short-term detentions (see RSF, 2022, for a Swedish example).

The threat of symbolic violence to democracy and media's democratic roles is of course much broader, but its deployment does not necessarily exclude media assemblages themselves either. One of the areas where

symbolic violence becomes apparent is hate speech, which Brown (2017a: 419–420) describes as speech that is:

> insulting, degrading, defaming, negatively stereotyping or inciting hatred, discrimination or violence against people in virtue of their race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, disability, gender identity, for example; and that it makes a positive difference because such speech implicates issues of harm, dignity, security, healthy cultural dialogue, democracy, and legitimacy, to name just a handful of relevant issues.

Even when a substantial political struggle exists over the regulation of hate speech (Brown, 2017a, 2017b; Brown and Sinclair, 2019)—as we have argued before, in Section 8—hate speech *as such* remains a problematic antagonistic practice, often distributed through media and often aimed at particular subgroups of the political community, as symbolic violence weakens media's representational democratic role, which is aimed at respectful communication and as it applies the logics of the corral to construct denizens. In the words of Waldron (2012: 4), symbolic violence undermines the idea that "each person, each member of each group, should be able to go about his or her business, with the assurance that there will be no need to face hostility, violence, discrimination, or exclusion by others." As Waldron (2012: 4) continues, hate speech:

> creates something like an environmental threat to social peace, a sort of slow-acting poison, accumulating here and there, word by word, so that eventually it becomes harder and less natural for even the good-hearted members of the society to play their part in maintaining this public good.

Also, harassment—again in its many variations—constitutes symbolic violence, even though it is often (but not always) more situated on an individual basis. Still, the pervasive presence of harassment, particularly in the online world, renders this world threatening and unsafe, which harms the media's ability to act as a democratic forum for the exchange of diverse perspectives. As Nielsen and Fletcher (2020: 154) write, online harassment and trolling, "once thought to be relatively marginal and subcultural phenomena" but "now mainstream and widely experienced," constitute

> intimidation [that] will lead some to take a less active part in online public life than they would otherwise want to, a dynamic only further compounded in political contexts where people may feel reluctant to discuss news openly or share their political views for fear of social or other repercussions.

This then brings us to the debates about polarization. As Nathanson (2014: 58) explains, "Polarization occurs when large clusters of people hold views that are 'poles apart'." As such, the existence of strong discursive differences (and identifications with them) is not unusual in democracies, and not necessarily problematic, as the problem-transformational procedures of democracy might prove sufficient. But—as Nathanson (2014: 58) also clarifies in their chapter—polarization is a threat to democracy because polarization also implies the activation of the mechanisms of othering, with its cognitive and affective dimensions, articulating the other as other-enemy. This (potentially) triggers the use of symbolic violence, and possibly also material violence, as Nathanson's (2014: 58) example of the civil war in the USA illustrates. He explains the problematic nature of polarization as follows:

> Not only are their views deeply inconsistent with one another, but they have intense feelings about their views and see no way to reconcile their views with those of people who disagree. Thus, they see their opponents as enemies and find it hard to sustain civility toward them.
>
> (Nathanson, 2014: 58)

Finally, symbolic violence is not only about speech but also about silence. To return to Keane's (2004: 192) example of the underreporting of rape: He argues that while there are many barriers that prevent people from reporting a rape and there are "various weapons for breaking down these barriers," "arguably the factor that is most empowering of those who suffer rape—initially encouraging them to do something about their suffering—is greater publicity of the crime of rape itself." Keane produces a staggering historical analysis of the silence with which rapes were met in previous centuries, arguing that the partial relinquishing of this silence in societies with "communicative abundance [has] helped in the long run to erode the silence and coded symbolism that surrounds rape and other forms of violence."

A similar argument can be made in relation to particular subgroups of the political community, whose symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978) harms their representational rights and dignity, and weakens the media's democratic roles. Tuchman's original article focusses on the symbolic annihilation of women in mass media, where she discusses the three mechanisms of trivialization, omission and condemnation, which intersected in generating reductionist representations of women. Similar arguments can be made for other subgroups, ranging from ethnic minorities to stigmatized groups such as sex workers and homeless people. In the latter case, Doudaki and Carpentier (2021: 222) summarize these representational issues in the following terms, but also argue that, and analyse how, alternative media—street papers—offer more humane representations of homeless people.

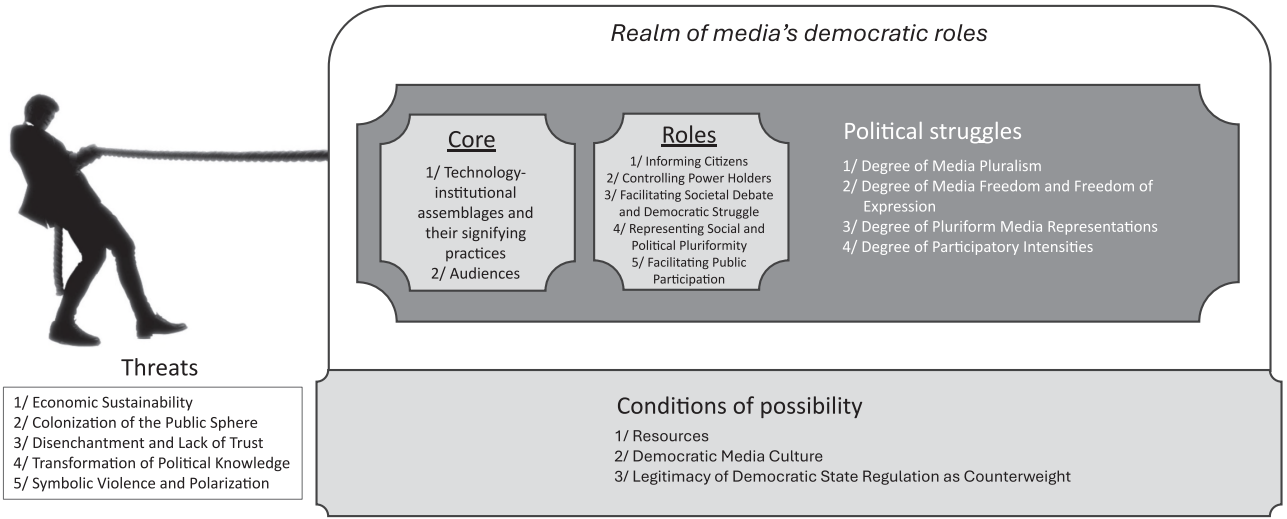

Figure 2.2 The complete model of the realm of media's democratic roles

if homeless people gain any visibility on mainstream media, they are portrayed through mainly negative stereotypical representations, as victims, parasites or sub-humans. As they are often talked about, they remain deprived of their own voice. Nevertheless, alternative discourses about homeless people do exist. They can, for instance, be found in street papers that have been produced in many countries since the late 1980s and 1990s.

11. A Second Visual Summary

In Figure 2.2, we find all components of the model of the realm of media's democratic roles.

Notes

1 From the entry on 'medium' in the Oxford English Dictionary.
2 For convenience's sake, we will return to the use of the term 'media' from now on.
3 For a critical reflection about this identity articulation, see Carpentier et al. (2014: 5).
4 Following Faulstich (2002: 213), we can add here that there are also media technologies that are much less associated with the public sphere (e.g., email, letters and telephone).
5 The notion of civic culture (in singular) is older; see, for instance, Almond and Verba (1963).
6 "The nasty business of lying in politics," as Keane (1991: 101) remarks, is hardly a new feature of politics.
7 The concept of 'ordinary people' is often—following in the footsteps of Laclau (1977), Hall (1981) and Fiske (1993)—defined in a negative-relationist way, by contrasting it to the elite, the power bloc or—in the words of Livingstone and Lunt (1996: 9)—the "elite representatives of established power."
8 Our discussion of violence here—in the subsection on the representation of the social—does not deny the political dimensions of crime and violence.
9 More emphatic media representations of perpetrators do exist; see, for instance, Reiner et al. (2003: 25–26).
10 Klimkiewicz (2010: 907) prefers the label of structural pluralism to capture pluralism within a "media system as a whole."
11 Even though reality TV can also have political counter-hegemonic dimensions, see Salamon, 2010.
12 'Bias' or 'distortion' presupposes the existence of an unbiased or undistorted world, which we believe is ontologically problematic. There are also alternative concepts available. For instance, writing from an eco-linguistic context, Stibbe (2012: 3) uses the concept of destructive discourses.
13 One illustration is the contemporary debate on 'woke' in the USA (which has also settled in Europe), where right-wing voices accuse mainstream media of being hijacked, and more left-wing voices argue for social justice.
14 Artificial intelligence or AI refers to the "application of computing technologies to assume tasks normally associated with human intelligence" (Lin and Lewis, 2022: 1627). Broussard (2018: 32) provides the following brief explanation of AI: "The important distinction is this: general AI is what we want, what we hope for, and what we imagine (minus the evil robot overlords of golden age science fiction). Narrow AI is what we have. It's the difference between dreams and real-

ity … Narrow AI works by analyzing an existing dataset, identifying patterns and probabilities in that dataset, and codifying these patterns and probabilities into a computational construct called a model."

15 See Carpentier (2003) for a critique on the (dominant articulations of the) digital divide concept.

16 For a critique of this perspective on social media, see Reveley (2013).

17 Although—one needs to add here—social media can play a significant role in political activism, and this position tends to discredit the political importance of signifying practices.

18 Here, disinformation can be considered similar to black propaganda; see Jowett and O'Donnell (1999: 18).

19 https://fom.coe.int/en/listejournalistes/tues?years=2023; https://fom.coe.int/en/listejournalistes/tues?years=2024.

Brief Conclusion

The relationship between democracy and media is strong, important and contingent. The diversity of media assemblages that together constitute the European media landscape has a central role to play in contemporary democracies. It is, in other words, hard to conceive of contemporary democracy without this media landscape. Arguably, that omnipresence also gives media a societal responsibility, which aligns well with the idea that democracy cannot be restricted to institutionalized politics. Actually, it is the media's relationship with democracy that demonstrates that democracy spans many different fields of the political, including the media field.

At the same time, this implies that the political not only impacts how democracy is articulated and performed, but the political also impacts the media's contribution to democracy. Even when the very core of democracy—articulated as liberal representative democracy—is hegemonic (and thus strongly fixated), there is ample space for contestation, as we have shown in the section on the struggles over democracy. Put in (too) simple terms: We can distinguish between a discourse of democracy that articulates democracy as procedural, minimalist and limited in reach, and a discourse that constructs democracy as substantive, maximalist and broad in reach. Still, there is a multiplicity of discursive positions possible within this main dimension, and it would thus be wrong to suggest that this dimension is a mere dichotomy. Moreover, this minimalist/maximalist dimension is not the only one that constructs democracy (however important it is).

Consequently, the contingency of democracy also impacts the articulation and performance of the role of the media *within* democracy. Here we can see how some of the democratic struggles become imported into the media landscape. Some of these political struggles are fierce: The illiberal-democratic and authoritarian tendencies imply that there are attempts to incorporate media assemblages into their anti-pluralist agenda, also reducing media freedom and freedom of expression. The political projects that defend a politics of recognition, and that struggle against symbolic violence, collide with the absolutists' interpretations of freedom of expression. A third example is the elitist-democratic discourse that aims to contain democracy within the field

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of institutionalized politics and that wishes to minimize participation. This means that this democratic discourse limits media's democratic roles to the informational and watchdog roles, in combination with a restricted articulation of the forum role, as a 'marketplace of ideas'. In contrast, a participatory-democratic discourse aims to maximize participation, including in the media field (as they rely on the broad articulation of the political), which activates all five of media's democratic roles.

Acknowledging that some of the media's democratic roles are not accepted by all democratic discourses, with the elitist-democratic discourse having a more limited approach, we argue that all five roles we outlined are important, but at the same time, prudence needs to be exercised not to take the representational and participatory roles for granted, as they can be rejected, articulated in more moderate manners or articulated in more radical ways (see Figure 3.1).

At the same time, not everything is political struggle, and contingency is not a permanent state. Contingency is 'only' a permanent possibility, unpredictable in its appearance and impact. One of the important theoretical positions of the discursive-material approach is that stability and fixity are politically generated, with hegemonic projects aiming to stabilize reality. This implies, in turn, that not anything goes, as social realities have histories of fixation. Democracy and media have a series of core components that we can safely consider as sedimented hegemonies. They are grounded in a series of conditions of possibility, whose realization supports these hegemonies. Of course, both core components and conditions of possibility can change in the future, resulting in different political and media realities. Not everything is stable, though—also not at the present moment—as the discussions of contemporary struggles over democracy and media's democratic roles show. What we have labelled in this book as struggles are those contestations that remain *within* democracy, but there are also ongoing struggles—we have

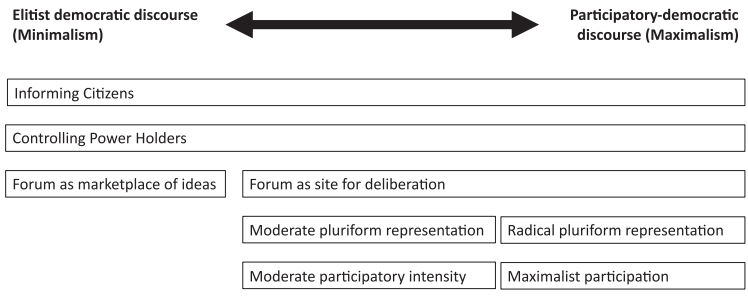

Figure 3.1 The contingency of the media's democratic roles

Democracy	***Media***
Core	**Core**
Articulation of Participation and Representation	Articulation of Technology and Institution
Political Community (and State)	Audience
Liberalism	
Struggles	**Struggles**
Balance between Participation and Representation	Degree of Media Pluralism
Politics versus the Political	Degree of Media Freedom and Freedom of Expression
Procedural versus Substantive Democracy	Degree of Reductionist Representations
Defining the Political Community	Degree of Participatory Intensities
Conditions of possibility	**Conditions of possibility**
Material Decentralizations and Stabilities	Communication Technologies and Infrastructures as Resources
Legitimate State	Legitimacy of Democratic State Regulation as Counterweight
Active People	
Democratic Culture and Its Value-Discourses	Democratic Media Culture
Threats	**Threats**
Democracy's Unfulfilled Promises	Transformation of Political Knowledge
Non-Participation	Disenchantment and Lack of Trust
(Re)centralisation of Power	Colonization of the Public Sphere
	Lack of Economic Sustainability
Closing Down the 'Corral'	
Violence, Antagonistic Other(ing)s and War	Increase of Symbolic Violence and Polarization

Figure 3.2 A structured overview of core components, struggles, conditions of possibility and threats in both realms

called them threats—that aim to push the current political and media structures and cultures outside the realm of democracy itself.

One of the still remarkable outcomes of the method we used, by looking at democracy first, and only then at media's roles in democracy, and by combining core components, struggles, conditions of possibility and threats, is that we can demonstrate the degrees of overlap between the realm of democracy and the realm of media's democratic roles (see Figure 3.2). Not completely surprisingly, the threats that characterize democracy and media's democratic roles are quite similar. Here we can see how interwoven the political and media fields are, and how—in order to protect democracy—holistic approaches are necessary, as well as considering the many other societal fields, which we did not address in this book. We also see how the struggles, conditions of possibility and threats overlap, showing, for instance, how threats act against conditions of possibility and attempt to shift what has been sedimented back into the realm of political contestation.

This book also demonstrated—in a subtle way—that the discursive-material approach is helpful in theory formation. Not only did this approach allow

us to highlight the contingencies and rigidities of the political and media fields, it also made us much more sensitive to the role of both discursive and material constructions in these discussions. For instance, in the discussions on the conditions of possibility of both fields, this approach allowed us to highlight the role of democratic (media) cultures *and* the importance of material institutions, organizations and recourses, not creating a hierarchy between them, but understanding them as always entangled.

Finally, we need to point to one other key position that is part of the discursive-material approach: Academic theory formation is not outside discourse, and it is not outside the political. As the careful reader has undoubtedly noticed, we wish democracy a very long continuation of its existence, but we also hope that the future will bring—as Giddens (2002: 93) calls it—a further democratization of (media) democracy.

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