Europe Remediated: A Transnational Public Sphere?

Media play a central role in creating the public debate on matters of public concern. In the immediate post-war period, the public service media in the nations of Western Europe followed the BBC model. Their function was to develop a democratic state and a national identity. Radio, television and the press were all fundamentally national in reach. At the same time there was an explicit emphasis on new forms of European cooperation, intended to avoid further wars. The European Coal and Steel Community was established first. Following its proposal in 1950 in the Schuman Declaration, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands came together to sign the Treaty of Paris in 1951. The European Economic Community (EEC) provided the governing institutions from 1967 until the European Union (EU) was created in 1993. The United Kingdom joined in 1973, Spain in 1986, Sweden in 1995 and Cyprus in 2004.

As the European project developed and, first, the European Community and, later, the Union increased the emphasis on a shared European culture, there was rising concern that the Union suffered from a ‘democratic deficit’ (Follesdal & Hix, 2005). The much repeated phrase, the ‘European Commission proposes, the Council disposes’ reflects the fact that final decisions are made by the
Council that represents the individual national members. Democratic power remains with the nation states. The lack of cross-European debate on European issues was attributed in part to the lack of cross-European media (Kaitatzi-Whitlock, 2007).

European Commission legislation has been designed to encourage a genuinely European cross-border public sphere. In the post-war years, the news agenda was set by national concerns. ‘Television Without Frontiers’ (EU, 1989) aimed to encourage liberalisation of the television regimes of the region. That was, on the whole, successful. Television did cross borders. Private commercial channels were licensed. Standards for advertising and children’s television were negotiated across the Union. Cultural protection of European product was balanced with access from outside. By 2003, legislators aimed for full transnational harmonisation between European television channels (EU, 2003). Effective although this legislation has been, the few European-wide television initiatives, such as the Lyon-based Euronews, never attracted large audiences. Debate about politics and media in Europe continues to focus on the national, in spite of two decades or more of globalised media.

Habermas argues that:

The solution does not consist in constructing a supranational public sphere but in transnationalising the existing national public spheres... the boundaries of national public spheres would become portals for mutual translations. (Habermas, 2009, p.183)

This is still parochial. His transnational public sphere is European. It is cross-border within Europe but not fully transnational. Habermas’ hope is that the citizenry will engage in debate across European borders. However, this fails to recognise that media from outside Europe are now an essential part of the public debate. The transnational public sphere is no longer limited by the borders of Europe.

European citizens are engaged with political issues in other European and non-European nations. Transnational channels, such as CNN, BBC World and others, shift the ways viewers access information about the world. Retransmitted television programs from nations outside the European Union are central to the experience of many television viewers in Europe. Niche products, such as shopping and religious channels, have proliferated. Whereas European public service television of an earlier age provided a national focus for framing debates, now different national and international perspectives can be readily accessed, television can