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# The Fourth Estate: the construction and place of silence in the public sphere

Although there have been different ways of defining the Fourth Estate in the history of liberal democracies, there is no disputing that it has played a large role in creating the self-image of both journalists and the institutions in which they work. The notion has always been associated with how a democratic public sphere sustains itself as a field within which the governed and the governors speak to each other, across the gap of power, and how they interact among themselves, citizens in discourse with other citizens, the politically powerful in dialogue with others of their kind. These conversations are, moreover, envisioned to be critical – that is, they involve objections against past and ongoing actions, and suggestions for improved action in the future.

In this paper we will argue that many of our assumptions about the role of the Fourth Estate do not take into account the changes in the media structures through which information (regardless of its validity) is sifted (Tumber 2001). Social media has led to the disruption and disintermediation of the traditional gatekeeping class (whether of print, radio or tv media), allowing citizens to bypass it. Engaged citizens are as apt to engage directly with democratic delegates and other strong agents through Facebook or Twitter as they are through letters to the editor or phone calls to their representatives. This does not mean that the old media is not heavily borrowed from, but it is borrowed from in a new and selective way. Investigative reporting is increasingly done by “networked fourth estates” (Benkler 2011) or the “Fifth Estate” (Dutton 2009) when globally operating agencies like WikiLeaks reveal raw data that state agencies, corporations, or political parties have routinely kept hidden in the past.

This is not to say that any of these replacements are unproblematic. Recent whistleblower cases like Edward Snowden’s disclosure of NSA’s surveillance of internet traffic, and the internationally coordinated work with the Paradise- and Panama Papers” show that traditional journalistic methods and skills are still important in revealing relevant data in publicly accessible manners. This does not, however, change the fact that the media landscape for the Fourth Estate has been qualitatively transformed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In this paper we will reflect upon the urgency of traditional narratives. We will argue that the disruptions operated by the new forms of social media has created the need for a new assignment, that of creating room for certain forms of silence. To make this argument, we will reference Derrida’s deconstructive approach to communication and the ideal, in political philosophy, of deliberative democracy. In the liberal tradition, the Fourth Estate is seen as ideally giving “voice to the voiceless” in the public sphere – in other words, counteracting coercive structures of silence (that is, counteracting the unequal distribution of voices, the favouring of hegemonic voices over marginalized communities, etc.). In this paper we will focus on the need for *creating* spaces of silence in the public sphere by (a), silencing certain dominant voices; (b), making room for an increased lack of answers, and (c) creating an awareness of the insufficiencies of the public spheres.

## I

The notion of the Fourth Estate has never been clearly and undisputedly defined, just as its emergence is somewhat disputed. Thomas Carlyle claimed that the term was coined by Burke in 1787 (Schultz 1998, 49) to mean the extra-governmental estate outside of the three represented in the British parliament: The Lords Spiritual, the Lords Temporal and the Commons. However, nobody has found the source for Carlyle’s quotation of Burke’s ad lib. In fact, Thomas Macaulay (1828), the Whig historian, is now generally cited as the earliest source (Hearn-Branaman 2011, 1). Since the nineteenth century it has however been largely used by the media themselves as a way to establish their privilege as “more than another business” (Schultz 1998, 1 – see also p. 48). In this way, the media becomes an essential part of the weave of democracy and freedom of expression. By putting this position in terms of “Estates”, the media inserts itself in the traditional Montesquieu-ian account of representative democracy (the executive, the legislative, and the judicial).

It would be a futile exercise in essentialism to claim that some one property distinguishes the media industry throughout history, since so much depends on the state of technology and the economic system in

which this “media” exists. However, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, certain features recurrently emerge: there is, for instance, an incessant emphasis (rehearsed in public discourse, argued in courtrooms, and referenced in legislation) on (a) the *independence* of the Fourth Estate, in opposition to the other estates. The character of this independence is, however, disputed. In some cases, the independence has been established simply through reference to the media logic being embedded in the commercial logics of the liberal market – as opposed to the logics of the political, and legally binding administrative powers. In other cases, the independence is articulated as a quest for *neutrality* or *impartiality*. Finally, the independence has been articulated as a quest for *opposition* – the ideal of neutrality being replaced by an ideal of plurality or opposition (Fairclough 1992, Ch. 3; Schultz 1998, 43-4).

Secondly, the Fourth Estate is often endowed with the important, semi-scientific assignment of (b) describing the world as it is, hereby making it possible for the citizenry to form their own opinions about what is to be done, or what has already been done. In addition, the Fourth Estate was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century said to facilitate (c) a public forum for debate, (d) articulate the prevailing public opinion, and (e) serve as a link between the traditional powers and the people. Furthermore, the Fourth Estate was assigned the task of (f) facilitating communication between groups, (g) educating the public, and (h) protecting individuals against abuses of power (Schultz 1998, 30).

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the (h) notion of the Fourth Estate was increasingly used in the sense of the “watchdog” who investigates the established powers. As a response to the reflections and recommendations of the Hutchins Commission (Commission on Freedom of the Press 1947), the Fourth Estate enterprise was gradually tied to ideas of social responsibility. What this responsibility entails has always been a lively area of dispute;<sup>1</sup> however, as part of the professionalization of journalism, a paradigm emerged that entrusted the journalist with not just the passive dissemination of information, but, as well, the questioning of sources, the active investigation of incidents, and the disclosure of publicly pertinent hidden information, thus creating limits to the reach of established powers.

These ideas of the Fourth Estate have certainly been the subject of heated debates, which often revolve around the failure of journalists to live up to this ideal,<sup>2</sup> or the failure to disclose their own interests and biases. But the very nature of the disputes seems to indicate large spread agreement (cultural and legal) that articulate important assignments (but not adequate descriptions) of media professionals insofar as they are to support the existence of a democratic public sphere based on traditional unidirectional mass media. The era of that form of mass media is, however, drawing to a close. New media forms emerge, leaning towards the traditional practices of journalistic media, but in altered ways (Eldridge 2017). And the question we have to deal with is whether the emergence of new internet based public spheres calls for new assignments. Hence, our suggestion, which in some sense turns upon its head the traditional slogan of giving voice to the voiceless. How do we make room for, and encourage, structures of silence in a public sphere that has become a 24/7 machine? How do we restore an awareness of the importance of silence in communicative exchanges?

Before going into that discussion we will however turn our attention to the traditional accounts, how the traditional ideals fit the present media landscapes.

## II

In today’s media landscape, the very concept of the Fourth Estate has been challenged, since it is not given that societal and political power is so clearly defined around the estates. On the one hand, the contemporary public spheres are global in reach and as such exceed the politically-defined jurisdictions. At the same time, they also close themselves around smaller and more exclusive communities, where it is not given that the estates themselves must be challenged (Hansen 2014).

In response to describing these fundamental changes, Benkler has suggested that we speak of *networked* Estates (Benkler 2011), which makes it possible to maintain a focus on a set of tasks in the public spheres, even when admitting that we cannot predetermine which agents and institutions will, at

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1 It is for example still disputed whether journalists should seek neutral and objective descriptions of facts, or whether it should furthermore be an ideal that the distributed information *intervenes* in the state of affairs – Hanitzsch 2011, 484-486; Bro 2008.

2 And whether they *should* live up to it – e.g. in Steel 2017.

any one time, be performing these tasks. We will follow Benkler in this twist of the issue. The important thing is not initially *who* must honour the Fourth Estate's tasks. Initially, the crucial assignment is to map out *which* tasks need to be dealt with in relation to maintaining a democratic society.

Posing the question in this way naturally opens for a reflection on which democratic ideal we are thinking of. As shown in different contexts, the Fourth Estate's task is not the same irrespective of what form of democracy we are aiming for (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1984; Berger 2000; Strömbäck 2005; Loftager 2007; Bro 2008; Steel 2017). That discussion, however, would exceed the scope of the present paper. In previous contexts, we have argued that the basic deliberative ideal of democracy is superior compared to the more traditional liberal approaches, but that the deliberative ideal is not sufficient in itself to get us the maximum of democracy we want: thus, we should still supplement it with some tools to deal with the fact that the deliberative ideal of all-inclusiveness leads to communicative and pragmatic self-contradictions (Hansen 2018a). We have previously argued that this insurmountability could be dealt with through processes of forgiving (Hansen 2016; 2018a) and through courageous truth-telling (Hansen 2018b).

The following argument will continue the effort to uncover how we can maintain the basic deliberative ideal that a fruitful democratic public sphere must seek to establish mutual understanding about why we think and act as we do, while at the same time handling the inherent paradox of this ideal (its aporetic fusion of necessity and impossibility). In this paper we will argue that this deficit of the deliberative approach in the media sphere can be dealt with by an increasing awareness of how meaning is shaped through structures of silence.

We will return to this claim below. Here, we must begin by pointing out that all of the above outlined ideals for the Fourth Estate converge with the deliberative ideal of creating a space for democracy in which citizens, together with those in power, can participate in public exchanges about how we should relate to the challenges facing society.<sup>3</sup> The very notion of public exchanges opens the ground for communicative intermediaries. As well, it presupposes disagreements and attempts to resolve them; and, as well, it presupposes an understanding of the fact that the challenges must be resolved in the light of an essentially contestable understanding of a common good.

We have only to look around at the current political scene to see that the traditional narratives of the Fourth Estate are challenged, as traditional institutions suffer, increasingly, from a deficit of legitimacy. The independence and objectivity (a+b) of the press has been challenged by the increasing popular awareness of the deficiencies of notions of neutrality and impartiality (Muñoz-Torres 2012, Jønch-Clausen and Lyngbye 2007). Furthermore, there is a fundamental challenge in the media's ability to constitute a sufficiently diverse opposition, due to their affiliation with a decreasing number of strong private interests (Dawes 2014). This insufficiency has created a space in which alternative media institutions have sprung up, whereby stagnation and self-interest in traditional media institutions are exposed, and the need for a place to critique the Fourth Estate becomes clear (Bruns, 2008; Dutton 2009; Benkler 2011). This is not to say that more traditional journalistic approaches fail altogether. New cross-media and/or non-profit initiatives (such as the Paradise- and Panama Papers, ProPublica, etc.) demonstrate the urgency of traditional journalistic skills (see also Steel 2017). But in a general perspective the diversity of media is under pressure.

In relation to the task of providing (c-f) forums in which standards of communicative rationality are upheld so as to allow the governed and the governors to come into critical contact with one another, this of course remains an important task – yet the obvious question today is whether the traditional media still represent the best option for enabling this contact. Those in power increasingly prefer to bypass the mainstream press (with the most famous example currently being the American President Donald Trump's de-emphasis of the traditional media in favour of social media) in order, they say, to get their message out "without interference". After inauguration he continues to communicate both to the American people and political adversaries on Twitter.<sup>4</sup> From a deliberative perspective (Hansen 2013; 2014; 2015) this does not fulfil the complete criteria for successful democratic communication. But it does entail that traditional Fourth Estate media no longer constitute sole communication link between citizens and those in power

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3 John Steel has recently argued that the close relationship between the traditional ideals of the Fourth Estate and the deliberative ideals constitutes a problem in itself, due to the unrealistic character of the ideals of deliberative democracy (Steel 2017). The effort of the following argument start from the same worry, but we are, however, not willing to give up upon the deliberative ideals entirely. We rather seek to *enhance* the deliberative ideals.

4 <http://nyheder.tv2.dk/politik/2016-08-29-her-er-fem-nyheder-fra-loekkes-store-facebook-tale> (last visited: 2017-02-08).

(Eldridge 2017). If journalists do challenge those in power with critical questions, it becomes tempting to bypass them with these exercises in supposedly populist communication (which nevertheless, by avoiding real debate with social media users, also navigate past the real virtue of the social media).

To some extent an increased focus upon the (g) educational and (h+i) investigative roles of the press might hold out a function that social media cannot do better. The Fourth Estate can turn towards the watchdog function and hereby force power holders to take them seriously (in as much as the revelations entailed by investigation, can force political power to respond to redrawn boundaries of what is relevant). This is definitely still a pertinent assignment for the Fourth Estate (Lanosga and Houston 2016). It is however also costly, and fits badly with media that are in the midst of struggling for revenue (Starkman 2014). Furthermore the approach as such is not without its own problems. Apart from the fact that investigative journalism suffers from a basic randomness (Schultz, 1998, 4), and that citizens are not as interested in that kind of journalistic production as journalists tend to believe (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein 2017), it has also gradually taken a sensationalist turn that at times is indistinguishable from celebrity journalism, and adds nothing to the deliberative model of democratic debate. This kind of sensationalist investigation rarely actually challenge those who hold power (Berger 2000, 84; Kohut 2001).

What remains is the educational ideal of the Fourth Estate. If the educational ideal is to be taken seriously, it is however important that in the industry's self-understanding we do not simply think of it as a facilitator of information. One of the larger changes wrought by the internet is that information – even rather technical scientific information – is communicated in many venues. Instead, journalistic self-understanding should coalesce around communicating inaccessible information in an accessible way without making it seem that this information is inviolable to debate and objection (Hansen 2015). Similarly, it is also increasingly important for the media to recognise that it has a task of facilitating the public *dialogue*, which is also in need of help so it can become democratically fruitful (Hansen 2011; 2013; 2015; Bro 2008).

These tasks are in line with the usual heading of debates about the activity and limits of the media. We will, however, in the following argue that the educational assignment due to the intensified activities in the public sphere should add a focus towards how structures of *silence* operate as a precondition for the ongoing dialogues.

### III

In order to understand why silence is an important aspect of exchanges in the public sphere, it is a good idea to look at Derrida's analysis of silence. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida argued that in order to understand how meaning emerges out of our communication, it is important to break free of the immediacy of the voice (Derrida, 1973). In opposition to Husserl's proposal that meaning emerges through signs pointing towards something, Derrida argued that this understanding of indication is inadequate. For the early Derrida, this inadequacy is bound in the fact that the pointing image overlooks the fact that meaning essentially presupposes a re-presentation (Derrida 1973, 5-7). For signs to be able to mean something, we must presuppose that there are potentially other cases of what we are talking about – cases, which in a sense are “the same” as what we are now talking about. These other cases, however, are not actually present in the situation where we use language to say something about a specific situation. They are non-present.

The implicated non-present phenomena shape the meaning given to those which are present. If there is a specific situation in which I assess the president's speech as “visionary”, then I bring the specific speech together with a number of other speeches, by which the speech is given a meaning that is very different from the meaning the speech would have if I called it “reactionary”. This constituent co-meaning is, however, silent; it is not itself outspoken, but in so far as we understand each other, we together take these absent co-meanings into account when we communicate with each other.

Derrida brings out a similar argument in the relationship between the speakers (Derrida 1973, 70-81). The point here is that meaning emerges only when the expression leaves the speaker. Communicative exchanges take place in the potential divergence between encoding and decoding, to put it in the terms of Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding distinction (Hall 1980, 125). Meaning only arises in so far as the sender detaches from the utterance – when the utterance leaves ego in favour of alter-ego. Once again, the point

is that meaning arises precisely in this transition from the active speaker to the one who receives the utterance. Meaning presupposes someone who is not the encoding subject him- or herself, but relates to the speaker as a decoding subject.<sup>5</sup> Here it is also clear that the addressees co-determine the utterance's meaning. If the recipient is a critic of the president, the above statement that the speech was visionary will have a completely different meaning than if the recipient supports the president.

The point here is that silence both lies outside the spoken and endows all utterance with meaning. But the silence is not something that gives meaning or itself has meaning *independently* of the linguistic context within which we operate. This is the heart of Derrida's criticism of Foucault (Derrida 2001, 39-44<sup>6</sup>; see also 1993, 243), which points out that silence is not a trans-historical unity, and which we can then use to understand various phenomena in their own right. Silence is something that we can only learn or experience from within the conversation – namely through silence's giving meaning to the conversation. We can understand silence as the *otherness* of communicative exchanges: that which lies outside the exchanges – as viewed from within the exchanges.

In this context, silence should not be understood as a pure absence of sound. It is not the silence of the cosmic space that we are talking about, but rather the implicit co-meanings in the spoken, which are precisely not spoken – but which are always left as a silent question to the spoken: Why *this* kind of silence rather than other kinds? As we saw above, silence is necessary for rational communicative meaning to emerge, but it is always an open question *which* silence we orientate ourselves towards. Silence is thus a force and as such not rationally justified in itself. The silence within the situation of enunciation forms and delimits the spoken – and this delimitation is what gives meaning to the spoken – but it does not transcend the spoken.

If we follow this Derridian thread, it will help us to become aware of the structures of silence prevailing in the contemporary media. This is a point that has several times been articulated as a challenge (Hansen 2011; 2013; 2014; Fairclough 1992, 2012; Noelle-Neumann 1991). From a deliberative perspective it is often seen as important to *uncover* silence, so that we can articulate and counteract hegemonic structures in the public discourse, whereby silent voices can be heard in the public sphere. In addition, we have argued that it must be a media professional (journalistic) task to give those who have been locked out of the media a voice in the public spheres, even if that means dismantling certain forms of rhetorical 'seriousness' and expanding our sense of what it is permissible to articulate (Hansen 2015).<sup>7</sup>

However, Derrida's analyses reveal that silence is not only something to avoid. Silence is also what *produces* meaning. In the following this will be our starting point. We will assert that silence should not merely be understood as a *challenge* in a democracy. The traditional approach to the relationship between silence and democracy presupposes that silence is something we must counteract. The idea of the Fourth Estate having to counteract the attempts of those in power to conceal questionable matters is indeed a part of the concept of investigative journalism, which is carried out by e.g. a watchdog. However, this is not a full account of the role of silence in democracy or in the social conditions that make possible the Fourth Estate. There is also an urgent democratic task for the Fourth Estate which is to *create* spaces for more (or at least: alternative structures of) silence.

## IV

The idea that we have *too little* silence in the democratic public sphere is not as widespread as the idea that there is a task of counteracting certain repressive forms of silence. However, both of these points are present in the Derridean point that silence is a necessary precondition for meaning to emerge in exchanges, while at the same time, it is never once and for all given *which* silence should be the applicable. Just as one can influence the public conversation by eliminating certain kinds of silence, it is

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5 Hall 1980, 118-9. Henrik Bødker has recently, rightly so, pointed out that one should be cautious not to buy in on Hall's distinctions between moments of "production/circulation" and "distribution/consumption". The emergence of social media has demonstrated that moments of acquisition may conflate severely with moments of production (Bødker 2016, 415). This does not, however, eliminate the potential divergence between encoding and decoding.

6 Derrida 2001 is a reflection on Foucault 1988, and led to some heated exchanges between Derrida and Foucault. In the present context we will, however, not get into this discussion.

7 The awareness of the necessity of analysing silence is also found in various journalistic enterprises that seek to dig out urgent stories that are for various reasons not actually revealed in the public spheres. An example of this can be found at <http://projectcensored.org/>

evident that one can influence the same by *introducing* different kinds of silence. In the later sections we will return to *which* forms of silence can be democratically important in the current media landscape. However, in this section we will first articulate the idea itself.

So far, we have only brought out the notion of silence from a semantic point of view, and as such it does not yet bear any consequences for journalistic practices. We have, as it were, mainly seen that silence is always part of communicative meaning, it remains to be seen ways in which there might be a *problem* in the role of silence. To see this we will turn our attention to a point articulated by Deleuze (Deleuze 1995, 129-134) and brought up again more recently by Hardt and Negri (Hardt and Negri 2012, 14-19 + 36-40). Deleuze writes in opposition to a basic assumption in many theories of democracy – including the deliberative, which we take as our starting point – that it is important to keep the public sphere open to as many statements as possible, so that all viewpoints will be challenged to the maximum, whereby only the strongest views are left. Deleuze opposes this point of view with the following statement:

...it's not a problem of getting people to express themselves but of providing little gaps of solitude and silence in which they might eventually find something to say. Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. [...] What we're plagued by these days isn't any blocking of communication, but pointless statements (Deleuze 1995, 129).

Deleuze here argues that the traditional idea that public spheres should be assessed as to their plurality of voices is inadequate. According to Deleuze the main problem in the constitution of democratic public spheres today is not that they are one-sided, but rather the waste amount of meaningless statements. When we have a public sphere in which silence has such a difficult time, we end up in a situation where what is said gradually becomes meaningless noise, meaningless noise that we are constantly forced to address.

According to Deleuze, this leads to “a violent death, a political assassination of literature” (Deleuze 1995, 131). This political assassination consists of the journalistic approach to writing taking over other more thoughtful and creative cultural forms (Deleuze 1995, 130-1). The problem with the journalistic approach is that it, according to Deleuze, merely reports what has happened – and the simple repetition has the effect of ostracising reflection on the relationship between description and reality.

In Deleuze' view we are thus in a situation where we just repeat already existing statements or views. The problem with this, apart from the redundancy, is that it becomes oppressive, since it locks us into certain thought patterns, which in turn locks us into a certain view of society – and in this way certain political approaches come to appear as indisputably necessary (Deleuze 1995, 126-129).

According to Deleuze, this stifles our exchanges because too many conditions appear to be essential and necessary. Truly creative exchanges free themselves from this yoke by dissolving that which seems impossible. And this process must take place by providing space for silence, whereby we become aware of the contingent in the existing structures of impossibility:

A creator who isn't grabbed around the throat by a set of impossibilities is not a creator. A creator's someone who creates their own impossibilities, and thereby creates possibilities. (Deleuze 1995, 133)

Opening an awareness of silence opens for creative reflections of our discursive structures, and this brings out the taken for granted structures of silence, whereby the necessities that emerge from these structures are being questioned. Impossibilities fall and thus possibilities emerge.

Deleuze' points cannot be directly inferred one-to-one from the Derridian points in the previous section. Deleuze does not claim that the expressions within pointless conversations are devoid of meaning in a semantic sense sketched by Derrida. Deleuze's claim is rather that insofar as we are trapped within certain hegemonic structures of silence, our utterances lose their ability to carry relevant expression – they do not add anything new (see e.g. Deleuze 1995, 130).

Thus Deleuze' point is not that silence in a Derridian sense has vanished altogether, because then there would be no communication in the public spheres at all. He would rather claim that the constant demand for us to continually utter something, and to relate to other people's utterances, dismantles the silence that is necessary for reflection. It makes the communication scenario of the courtroom central to our sense-making, where silence becomes, implicitly, an admission or a defeat, rather than allowing the time for thought. Deliberation then becomes endless debate, and the language of positions colonizes the lifeworld. Silence becomes even more difficult to reflect upon. Silence becomes a deficiency that must be countered

by new utterances which can create attention.

Silence at this point seems to disappear. It does, however, not really disappear; it just becomes invisible. And in this invisibility lies a coercive or expropriative danger, as we will be forced to repeat the prevailing structures of silence – hereby preventing more creative and fruitful responses to urgent problems, because we are trapped in restricted conceptions of what is (apparently) necessary, possible or impossible.

In other words: The lack of silence, articulated by Deleuze, is problematic because it fixates *specific* structures of silence in the Derridean sense due to a lack of awareness of their significance.

Deleuze' text was written in 1985 and thus formulated before the internet was a significant factor. However, we can say that his argument has become even more sociologically relevant with the emergence of the mass use of digital devices and the internet. We have previously argued (in Hansen 2009) that the emergence of internet based media has reduced the silence of dialogical turns, whereby the reflective implications of the gaps diminishes. At the same time it has opened up a world of peer to peer expression across boundaries, in blogs, or social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube etc. (McNair 2006; Dahlberg 2005; Lanham 2007), but has also led to the crumbling of the border between public and private life (Marx 2001; Viseu et al 2004; Dawes 2011), to a reinforcement of partisanship, and to a commercialization of content such that social media companies are continually inciting expression – not out of a desire to contribute to a process of deliberation.

## V

In this section, we will return to the previous task of identifying the tasks that the Fourth Estate should take up in the distributed public spheres. Prior to this reflection, it is important to point out that not all forms of silence are democratic fruitful. The philosophical argument in the previous section implies that silence is a necessary condition in the genesis of meaning. But silence as a meaning resource can, of course, be used both for creating “good” and “problematic” structures of meaning. A classic example of the kinds of silence which are democratically problematic would be when those in power silence critical voices. Either by preventing them from expressing themselves in the public sphere (in its most classic form through censorship), by frightening or persecuting them, or by drowning out their voices with other statements that grab the audience's attention.

Furthermore, the following suggestion that it should be an important assignment of the Fourth Estate to facilitate structures of silence is not path breaking as such. In a classical sense, from its conception the press has engaged in selecting information to be publicized, thus giving weight to certain kinds of voices and certain notions of expertise, (Hansen 2013), and devaluing, or in effect silencing, other voices, other angles of vision, which in effect reduced them to silence in the mainstream. The point is, however, that in the traditional media technologies, which were unilateral, the silencing came, to an extent, from the structure of the media, and was only partly resolved by competition within the media. From its starting point the media was already *forced* to silence voices, and this did at least bring about a minimum of clarity in the conversations in the public spheres. But this structure is fundamentally undermined by the greatly increased bandwidth of media.

Before we turn to the actual strategies, it is important to emphasize that we will not argue that the suggested strategies should replace all existing approaches. Neither will we argue that each one of the could be fruitful in every public setting. We will merely argue that they could be useful in different contexts as a supplement to existing approaches. Actually it could even be argued that they are to some extent mutually contradictory.<sup>8</sup> We cannot, for example, at the same time follow a strategy of reducing dominant voices, in order to make less powerful voices be heard (strategy a), while at the same time withdrawing from conversation altogether (strategy c). We will, however, argue that as a supplement in different settings the suggest strategies could give us more deliberative fruitful public exchanges.

(a) In other words, the active administration of silence no longer comes structurally from media technology. In the early years of the emergence of the internet, this was often lauded as a democratic benefit, the obvious argument being that the more voices in the public, the better for the deliberative processes. It has, however, been shown that the mere availability of many voices does not guarantee a

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<sup>8</sup> As done by one of the blind referees who have helped to improve this paper.



diversity in the voices heard (e.g. O'Donnell 2009, 504<sup>9</sup>). This is the starting point for our first proposal, which is that the Fourth Estate reflects on the social types and categories that continue to be given too much space for opinion and expression. Given the conditions necessary to sustain deliberative democracy, which consist, in part, in constructing fair forums in which we encourage constructive discussion based on arguments where we listen to one another, and in good faith attempt to understand mutual differences (the traditional understanding which was coined in Habermas 2008, 1996, ch. 8), we should take seriously biases that result when some voices, in disproportion to their real magnitude in society, take up *too much* space in the public sphere. Based on a deliberative perspective, it would be desirable to have many *different* voices and issues in the public sphere (Porto 2007; Wurff 2011), and here a toning down of dominant voices could give space to highlight alternative voices. This is not to say that we should silence the prevailing dominant voices, but rather that we balance them with other voices. Although we have the technology that makes it possible for a vast number of voices to gain entry to potentially global forums on the internet, this does not mean that we have an infinite amount of receptive capacity to give each of them equal hearing. An important assignment for the Fourth Estate is thus to create awareness of and attention to new voices by toning down dominant ones.

(b) The first strategy merely silences certain voices, but in current public spheres this will merely lead to an awareness of new articulate voices. A second, slightly more radical, strategy for giving silence a new role in the public spheres involves reducing the amount of *answers* in the public sphere. This point can have a deliberative attraction if we connect it with the hermeneutical understanding of the relationship between questions and answers. In this view, questions are understood as what opens our horizons of understanding prevailing issues, while answers tend to diminish our open mindedness (Gadamer 2004, 362-371).

One way to give more weight to the questions in the public sphere, at the expense of the answers, could be to give more space for doubt and lack of responses in the public sphere. In current public spheres those in power are met by an expectation that they can come up with quick answers to difficult problems. Thus it is only natural for them actually to provide such answers. This structure is placed under additional pressure in connection with the shortened response times which are a result of the digital forms of communication. The drawback of this structure is, however, that thoughtfulness suffers under the short deadlines. The structural pressure to respond in a shortened timespan reduces the reflective forces of silence between the dialogical turns (Hansen 2009).

A normative task for a modern Fourth Estate could be to provide media forms with space for the fact that there are questions and challenges which cannot be resolved within the short time frame that most journalistic formats allow for – that is to say, a task of allowing time for reflection and debate without foreclosing on it in favour of immediate answers. And to educate citizens to accept the fact that some questions may remain unanswered. A suggestion for such a practice has been proposed under the term “slow journalism”, which M.L. Masurier recently has articulated thus:

Although he did not use the term, Ananny was making an argument for the considered silence and timing of slow journalism as one way to improve the quality and accuracy of public discourse. (Masurier 2015, 148)

Maurier articulates slow journalism as a tool to increased awareness of silence structures that is in line with Porto's proposal to open up the press to new interpretive frames in the public sphere (Porto 2007). As with our first suggestion, it is again the case that the conscious working on the introduction of new forms of silence does not in itself lead to less activity in the public sphere. But it does provide room for new types of activity, for instance, a questioning of the experiences of the powerless and obscure in the lifeworld – based on the new structures of silence. Slow journalism can counterbalance the demand for communicative speed inherent in most internet based media.

Instilling an increased patience for the process of finding answers to certain large problems will undoubtedly lead to a greater interpretive diversity. However, we do not believe that the democratic gains can be limited to an increased diversity of interpretations, just as we do not think that a silence-borne

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9 Even though the following argument sets out from O'Donnell's analysis of a problem in current public spheres, our suggested solutions differ slightly (even though they do not contradict). While O'Donnell suggests that journalists should help us listening to alternative narratives, the most radical of our suggestions will take as its starting point that the very practice of narration is part of the problem.

slowness necessarily will “improve the quality and accuracy of public discourse”. Rather, the silence will lead to new *types* of quality and accuracy. The point here is that the absence of answers gains a significance *as such*. Unlike the fast (and often inadequate or simplistic) answers, the lack of answers identifies precisely this particular inadequacy – where the fast answers hide the inadequacy. To take a recent example en Western Europe 2016: Huge amounts of refugees cross the borders, seeking asylum. The question “How do we stop this in a humane way” probably does not have any good answers (at least they still have not been found). Either we do not stop them, or at some point somebody will have to use bodily force. But politicians were far too eager to provide inadequate answers, trying to convince the public opinion that effective answers could be found.

In addition to spaces for a greater diversity of interpretation, the lack of answers also provides an awareness that the answers that abound in the public sphere are precisely answers which are open to debate – which again opens a space for critical evaluation and discussion that is otherwise closed off by fast superficial answers. The lack of answers thus provide space to keep the horizon of the questions open, which is a crucial prerequisite in the deliberative democracy.

The task of the Fourth Estate in relation to this strategy consists of developing media formats and questioning techniques that provide space for delayed answers that are not embarrassing; and perhaps also to educate citizens to accept the insecurity or indeterminacy that may turn up as a response to this situation.

To substantiate this suggestion in more detail, it can be illuminating to compare with an already existing journalistic format: The debate between clearly defined opposing parties, e.g. representatives from the political right versus the political left. This format is characterized by disputing agents who try to show the deficiencies of the other, but normally they end up in a draw where the moderating journalist concludes that the “debate will probably continue”. At a first sight this resembles the above suggestion, because it demonstrates that none of the parties can “win” the debate. At a closer look it does, however, not carry any caution in the articulation of answers. Each part is often all too eager in trying to convince the audience that he or she has the answers, in contrast to the opposing part. The debate confirms existing structures of silence in forcing the listeners to take side in favour of one of the predefined positions.

However, maybe the structures of silence that found the debate should themselves be questioned. If this kind of debate were to stimulate reflections on the structure of silence, they should rather be framed around questions that force the participants to reflect upon the deficiencies, insecurities or drawbacks of each participants own stand.

In this context, it is, however, important to have clear divisions, because it is, of course, at some points still an important task for the Fourth Estate to demand answers from those in power.

(c) We have based our arguments concerning silence on Derrida’s analysis of silence; in keeping with the Derridian theme, it is important to point out a weakness in the hermeneutical and interpretive understanding of the question/answer dialectic. Derrida would argue that a violent silence is already present in the *question*:

Here the discourse comes up against its limit: in itself, in its performative power itself. [...] Here a silence is walled up in the violent structure of the founding act. Walled up, walled in because silence is not exterior to language. (Derrida 1992, 13-14)

Here, Derrida does not distinguish between whether we relate to given issues in a questioning or answering manner – it is the very discursive articulation that contains a violent structure in relation to the articulated topic.

Derrida hereby tightens the previous point about the holding back of the answers in the public sphere. Could we imagine public spheres where there was a similar work of holding back questions? In what sense would we be able to say that this would be deliberately attractive?

A traditional discourse theoretical answer to this would be to reflect on how articulated questions set the framework for the answers that can appear as relevant and legitimate. The radicalised deconstructive question to this would therefore be whether we could imagine forms of media that systematically work to bring questions to silence.

With such questions we are certainly at the margins of media, since what we are asking here is whether we could imagine forms of media that operate outside the framework of questions and answers – i.e. mediaforms that bring questions and answers to silence. On reflection, the surprising answer is that such

forms of media actually already exist – in the format of “slow television” (Hellar 2014; Gilbert 2014<sup>10</sup>). Examples of this can be found in the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation showing the entire train ride along the Bergen Line, the Danish public service channel DR Ramasjang, where the end of transmission is followed by a night-time showing of sleeping people, BBC taking us on canalboat- and bus rides, etc.<sup>11</sup> The message here is fairly clear: Time for discursive narratives and exchanges is over, get out into the real world (or go to sleep). The time for questions and answers is over

We will not claim that precisely this form can in itself be directly injected into the deliberative ideals of the public sphere, just as it may be argued that an excessive use of this strategy would be rather recumbent and out of line with the engagement ideals of the deliberative ideals. However, there is perhaps an important point hidden in this call to end (or better: to pause) the engagement in narrative exchanges, because therein lies an invitation to leave the discursive public sphere. We are dealing with a format that explicitly points towards the public sphere’s own limits. And it may be this invitation that radicalises the discourse theoretical appeal to vary the questions. To be democratically fruitful, the deliberative public sphere ought to be capable of bringing itself to silence. This radical silencing should however be conceived in a close connection with a request to return to the public deliberations. In the words of Deleuze: This kind of silence is deliberately important, because it helps us “eventually find something to say” (op.cit).<sup>12</sup>

Hereby we are back at the educational task of the Fourth Estate, because it is essential in this context that this pointing towards the importance of silence cannot happen merely by being absent – the pure absence will not lead to silence, because there are always huge amounts of alternatives for the media consumer – both traditional media and social media activities. If the Fourth Estate becomes silent, the increasing cacophony of strategic media professionals will simply take over. The radical pointing of a future Fourth Estate towards silence would be opposing the annexation of life by the public sphere – your right to solitude, to a life outside of the public sphere, should be defended. Taking the role as the Fourth Estate seriously means, in this suggestion, to invite the consumer/user/citizen to leave the public sphere – for him or her to become a competent agent in the public sphere, and in society generally.

Therein actually lies the most radical suggestion from the deconstructive approach to the deliberative public sphere: If the various efforts in the public sphere are to succeed in facilitating fruitful dialogues, then the same public sphere should be able to exhibit its own silence, its own limits. It must be able to reach out toward a reality that cannot be fully captured in the discursive public sphere. A reality where we must be aware of what is missing in the prevailing public spheres – in silence. This awareness will make us more reflective and competent agents in subsequent public discussions – so the discussions do not end up in the negative infinity of self-reference, but actually moves us to an active and reflected relation to that which lies outside of articulation.

## VI

To return to the opening question of how traditional ideals of the Fourth Estate within a deliberative understanding of democracy can be updated or rearticulated due to the changes in the media landscape, we can summarize our suggestion thus: Derrida’s deconstruction of meaning and his accentuation of the importance of structures of silence, constitutes a reminder of the importance of the structures of silence – how these structures determine how utterances are understood.

The limited bandwidth of traditional media naturally called for an awareness of ways in which journalists had to silence voices. With the unlimited bandwidth of new social media this is less so, and we thus suggest that this is incorporated as a normative assignment of media professionals (in a broad sense – Eldridge 2017) in their capacity of the Fourth Estate. This can be done in (at least) three ways, by: (a) silencing certain dominant voices, hereby making room for alternative voices; (b) making room for an

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10 An extensive list of examples of the format can be found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow\\_television](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_television) (last visited: 2017-02-08).

11 An extended list of examples can be found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow\\_television](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_television) (last accessed: November 30, 2017).

12 An excessive version of strategy (c) would be just as deliberately unfruitful as the excessive engagement in ongoing discussions. While the excessive version of strategy (c) leads to individuals that merely listen to themselves, the excessive engagement in ongoing discussions leads to individuals that never listen to themselves. We need a public exchanges in which the participants listen to both themselves and the others.

increased lack of answers; and (c) creating an awareness of the insufficiencies of the public spheres.

These suggestions may seem paradoxical given the deliberative starting point. The deliberative ideals of democracy certainly call for a diversity of voices in the public spheres, and it thus seems paradoxical to urge for a limitation of voices. It has, however, become evident that the mere *multiplicity* of voices does not constitute such a *diversity* of voices (O'Donnell 2009). The modern media landscape calls for new assignments of the Fourth Estate, the assignment of making room for diversity (tuning down dominant voices), reflectivity (increased focus on questions rather than answers), and an awareness of the limitations of discursive exchanges (pausing the ongoing debates and exchanges entirely).

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