

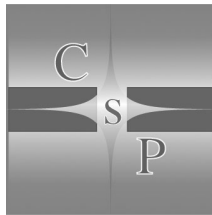
# Participation and Media Production



# Participation and Media Production: Critical Reflections on Content Creation

Edited by

Nico Carpentier and Benjamin De Cleen



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Participation and Media Production: Critical Reflections on Content Creation,  
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## PREFACE

SONIA LIVINGSTONE

Every decade or so, the academy is gripped by a fascination with an imperative to understand a particular theory, epistemology, or change in the world. Following the initial flurry of activity and debate, the legacy of the research that results generally outlasts the early excitement, spawning further waves of elaboration and critique before a new fascination emerges. This is not to say that we are the mere pawns of fashion, but rather that research is social, shaped by human communication processes and subject to highs and lows in intensity, convergence, and significance. Today, the field of media and communication is fascinated by the social and technological transformations in the conditions by which communication can be created—as evidenced by the public's enthusiastic appropriation of social networking, file sharing, message services, blogs, and wikis. Though more obvious in wealthy countries, parallel shifts now occur in developing countries, indicating how the affordances of these networked, hybrid, and convergent information and communication technologies are themselves shaped by processes of globalisation, democratisation, and privatisation.

As the public rushes to become practitioners, experimenting with and enjoying the new opportunities to communicate in potentially vast networks, the academy is, for once, keeping pace—thinking about, researching, and deliberating over these opportunities, while also engaging with and advising designers, activists, policy makers, and governments. All this seems to demand new concepts, new methods, and ever more multidisciplinary research. Yet until recently, our field has been comfortably bifurcated into the highly contrasted modes of one-to-one communication (predominantly conducted face-to-face throughout most of human history) and one-to-many communication (this potential for mass communication arising only through the particular historical conjunction of the rise of mass society and the development of mass media technologies in the late industrial age).

Though new developments may have a short history, they also have a long past. Communication historians have been charting the blurring and

shifting relations among diverse forms of communication (e.g., mass vs. interpersonal, mainstream vs. alternative, national vs. transnational) for decades. But only recently have the changing conditions for creating communication achieved sufficient recognition (and a sufficient critical mass of users) to generate the intensity of discussion required to divert established research agendas, stimulate debate across theoretical boundaries, and so facilitate new arguments and findings—as reflected in this volume. The origins of this volume lie in the theme I developed for the International Communication Association's 2007 Annual Conference held in San Francisco: "Creating Communication: Content, Control, and Critique" invited examination of the ways in which people participate in complex information and communication environments. Who, today, is communicating with whom and how? And who is listening to this explosion of communication? How shall we understand, and research, the transformative potential of amateur producers, citizen journalists, or "user-generated" content? Are the subaltern gaining "voice" and subverting established authorities? What cultural, expert, or institutional framings shape the creation of content across political, professional, and interpersonal spheres—and with what consequences?

In seeking answers to such questions, critique is vital in at least three ways. First, our current fascination with the changing conditions for creating communication renews our critical gaze on the hierarchical authority structures and commercialised institutions of communication that dominated the last century. Only now, perhaps, can we believe—hope—that things could be otherwise. Witness the reinvigoration of the media reform movement and the communication rights movement, among other radical initiatives. Less exciting but just as vital is a second form of critique, that of reflexive self-critique: in the face of optimism on all sides, the academy must scrutinise the claims made, insist on their grounding in rigorous evidence, and ensure the debates do not rush ahead so fast that lessons from past new media or earlier social change are forgotten. With diverse communication subfields engaged in parallel discussions—from health communication to journalism studies, from organisational to popular communication, from feminist to communication and technology studies—we must not reinvent the wheel, forget to learn from earlier mistakes, or perpetuate rather than challenge popular myths of change.

But third, and most important, the academy must be critical of the optimistic hyperbole accompanying technologically mediated social change, proffering a counterbalancing pessimism in contemporary debates. As communication possibilities are reconfigured, some are further excluded or newly marginalised, with rather few among even the world's

wealthy populations actually engaging in creative or emancipatory forms of participation. Critique is required to chart the fast footwork of established power (both state and private sector) as it re-establishes, even extends, traditional forms of political and market dominance, co-opting alternative forms and practices as fast as their innovators can invent them. Specialist expertise in ethical, technological, and legal domains is required to track the interests at stake as innovations, policies, and practices are shaped and disseminated. Sceptics rightly ask whether, in the grand scheme of things, it really threatens established institutions that people can form their online health support groups or citizen journalists make their own news? Indeed, the public is not necessarily the hero of our new narrative, for much content created by the public is offensive, intolerant, or banal, serving to exclude rather than include.

This volume showcases some of the best work addressing these and other questions, analysing the conditions, the complexities, and the significance of contemporary forms of technologically mediated communication and participation for ordinary members of public and for society more widely. It asserts that critique is more necessary than ever, as norms of authority, trust, authenticity, and legitimacy evolve. Only with a critical lens can we hope to recognise both the diversification of political expression, the exuberant irreverence of youth, and the quieter flowering of digital storytelling among hitherto marginalised voices—as well as the antidemocratic responses of repressive governments and the legal, regulatory, or economic barriers that restrict the potential of the contemporary communication environment. Since, in addressing such questions, the very standpoints from which we as researchers draw our strength are also challenged in the context of globalisation, all this adds up to an agenda that, I believe, will stimulate the field of media and communication for the decade ahead. This volume sets the scene most ably, and I look forward to the debate as it unfolds.

Sonia Livingstone, ICA President, 2007–2008



# INTRODUCTION: BLURRING PARTICIPATIONS AND CONVERGENCES

NICO CARPENTIER AND BENJAMIN DE CLEEN

## Introduction

What do *participation*, *interaction*, *interactivity*, and *access* mean? How have these concepts' meanings changed in the past decades, through the introduction of a new generation of media? What has happened to the concept of participation? What have we lost because of these changes?

These questions might seem strange at first, in an era when new media are celebrated for their participatory potential. But they do push us into a critical mode towards these changes in the media landscape. This volume's authors aim to activate this critical mode and reflect on the participatory nature of contemporary media organizations and products. In order to stand even a remote chance to realize this objective, and to critically unravel the societal role of participation, we need to reject the conceptual stability of participation. The reason for this is that participation is a complex and contested notion, covering a wide variety of meanings: "the widespread use of the term . . . has tended to mean that any precise, meaningful content has almost disappeared; 'participation' is used to refer to a wide variety of different situations by different people" (Pateman, 1970, p. 1).

From a different perspective, this diversity in meaning can actually be seen as characteristic for notions which play crucial roles in the epistemologies of the political–democratic. Notions like participation feature in different discourses, all of which use the signifier in different ways, and provide it with different meanings. For this reason participation can be called—following Laclau and Mouffe (1985)—a floating signifier, overloaded with meaning. The consequence of this line of thought is that the meanings attributed to participation—some more dominant than others—are neither neutral nor accidents of history. From a more critical perspective these meanings are part of a societal struggle and constituted

by ideological processes, which (over)determine the ways in which we define and practice participation. Both the material participatory processes and practices and the ideological–discursive articulations of the concept of participation contribute to these constructions of (the meaning of) participation.

## Participations

There are two ways of dealing with the contingency of the notion of participation. A first strategy is based on the expression of regret for the signifiatory chaos, combined with the attempts to undo it by (almost archeologically) unraveling the authentic meaning of participation. This strategy is relatively old. Already in 1969 Arnstein published her ladder of participation, which had the following eight steps: manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power, and citizen control. From a slightly different angle, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) more recently (2001) developed a three-stage model (information distribution, consultation, and active participation) that structurally resembles Arnstein’s ladder. Considerably less critical and radical than Arnstein’s model—as the bottom and top steps of the ladder have been eliminated—participation is defined as

a relation based on partnership with government, in which citizens actively engage in the decision- and policy-making process. It acknowledges a role for citizens in proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue—although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with government. (OECD, 2001, p. 16)

This definition carries with it the echoes of one of the classic definitions of participation, developed by Pateman in her 1970 book *Democratic Theory and Participation*. In these definitions, Pateman distinguishes between partial and full participation. Partial participation is defined as “a process in which two or more parties *influence* each other in the making of decisions but the final *power* [italics added] to decide rests with one party only” (p. 70). Full participation is seen as “a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal *power* [italics added] to determine the outcome of decisions” (p. 71).

All of these definitions and approaches have a common, almost messianic, concern toward the concept of participation: They want to protect and rescue it. The tactics are relatively similar, because they all consist of differentiating between (authentic or real) participation and

other practices which are only nominally participatory—and which can be unmasked as forms of *pseudoparticipation*. The second strategy to deal with this signifiatory diversity distances itself (at least in a first phase) from the question of differentiating between authentic participation and pseudoparticipation. It focuses on the signifiatory process that lies beneath the articulation of participation and defines it as part of a political–ideological struggle. From this perspective, the definition of participation is one of the many societal fields where a political struggle is waged between the minimalist and the maximalist variations of democracy and politics. It is a struggle between two political–ideological, archetypical models. In the minimalist model, democracy is confined to processes of representation, participation to elite selection through elections, and the political to the domain where political elites organize their decision-making processes. In the maximalist model, democracy is seen as a more balanced combination of representation and participation, and the political is considered a dimension of the social (Mouffe, 1997; 2000), which can be operational in the sphere of political decision-making but also in other societal spheres—such as the economy, culture, and media, to name but a few.

The definition of participation is an important part of this confrontation between both models, as its specific articulation shifts depending on the specific model that makes use of it. As mentioned before, this is not a mere academic debate but a political–ideological struggle for how our political realities are defined and organized. It is also not a mere semantic struggle but a struggle that is lived and practiced. In other words, we structure our practices at least partially on the basis of the idea of participation. As a consequence, the definition of participation is not a mere outcome of this political–ideological struggle but an integrated and constitutive part of this struggle. Expressed a little less nuanced: it is the beginning and ending of this struggle, because the definition of participation allows us to think, to name and to communicate the participatory process (as minimalist or as maximalist) and is simultaneously constituted by our specific (minimalist or maximalist participatory) practices. In short: the definition is partially constructed through practices—and partially constructs and structures these practices.

The second strategy to deal with the signifiatory diversity of the concept of participation is not as disconnected from the first strategy (looking for authentic participation) as might appear at first sight. Three components from the first strategy are worth salvaging.

First: taking a closer look at the definitions used in the first strategy, it becomes reasonably easy to distill the core issue in this debate about participation (and the political–ideological struggle that lies behind this debate). The issue that runs through these definitions, in many different forms, is power—and, more specifically, the way power is distributed in society. Some prudence is called for here, as power is often reduced to the possession of a specific societal group. Authors like Foucault (1978) have argued against this position, claiming that power is an always present characteristic of social relations. In contemporary societies, the narrations of power are always complex narrations of power strategies, counterpowers, and resistance. These power struggles are never limited to one specific societal field (e.g., “the” economy) but can be present on all societal fields and levels. Despite (or because of) this nuance, the debates on participation can be seen as a struggle for political power (in the broadest sense possible)—or, rather, as a power struggle about who can take on which roles in society. In the minimalist models, power is centralized as much as possible, while in the maximalist models the decentralization of power is preferred. Revisiting the first strategy (based on authenticity) allows us to see the participation debate as a latent conflict (which is sometimes rendered manifest) about who can become involved in societal decision-making processes, in the definition and resolution of societal problems, in deciding which procedures should be followed, and in the societal debates about these definitions, procedures, and resolutions. Divergent positions on who should be empowered and granted the opportunity (and “the” power) to speak thus become an integrated part of the debates about participation and the underlying political–ideological struggle.

Next: from the first strategy, we can also derive the need to delineate the concept of participation, while maintaining its contingency and structural openness. The above-mentioned debate about participation requires some form of discursive fixity, which obliges us to return to the first approach and the core concepts used in this approach. These core concepts are articulated in contingent ways, but also their mere existence is of importance here. This argument might seem superfluous at first sight, were it not for the involvement of two other notions—access and interaction—in the debate about participation. As the relationship between these two notions and power is much less strong and explicit, their being used in the participation debate also makes them part of the struggle for the minimalist or maximalist articulation of participation. Although the differences among access, interaction, and participation have been dealt with more extensively in other texts (see Carpentier, 2007), it remains

crucial to distinguish between these concepts. It suffices here to refer to one example, where the difference between two of these concepts was established, namely the UNESCO debates on access and participation (from a communicative perspective, within the framework of the development of a New Information and Communication World Order [NWICO]). In the UNESCO debates, access was defined as

the use of media for public service. It may be defined in terms of the opportunities available to the public to choose varied and relevant programs and to have a means of feedback to transmit its reactions and demands to production organisations. Participation implies a higher level of public involvement in communication systems. It includes the involvement of the public in the production process and also in the management and planning of communication systems. Participation may be no more than representation and consultation of the public in decision-making. (Servaes, 1999, p. 85)

Especially when the internet gained its momentum, concepts such as access and interaction increased in importance. As both concepts are only necessary conditions for participation, and in themselves insufficient to speak of participation, the increased importance of access and interaction caused an implicit downgrading of the more radical and maximalist component of participation. The advent of web 2.0 did not change this, as many of these online organisations again restrict the opportunities for participation, whilst still using a maximalist discourse. The implicit nature of the downgrading complicates the analysis of the political–ideological struggle behind participation and therefore legitimates the delineation of the notions of access, interaction, and participation.

Finally: a third component that needs to be highlighted is the unavoidability of the positioning of any author that intervenes in these debates. Ideology does not stop at the edges of analyses but is an integrated part of any analysis. This does of course not ignore the fact that the mere debate on the “correct” definition of participation is too simple; for that reason, we need the second strategy. But a mere description of the dynamics of power in participatory processes—without an evaluation of these processes—is also too simple. This is yet another area where the first strategy of looking for real participation proves to be helpful. This means more specifically that we subscribe to the call of a number of authors (Giddens [2002] to name but one) to continue to deepen democracy and include all societal fields (including the media) in this democratization process. This does not imply that all expert systems should be devastated mercilessly—this might be a difficult position for academics to take—but this does mean that the power equilibriums and the participatory potential

in every domain of the social should be analyzed carefully, and ways should be developed to maximize both of them. This plea for an increase of societal power balances has a clear utopian dimension. Situations of full participation, as described by Pateman, are utopian nonplaces (or, better, “never-to-be-places”) which will always remain unattainable and empty but which simultaneously remain to play a key role as ultimate anchoring points and horizons for our analyses. Despite the impossibility to fully realize these situations in the social praxis, their fantasmatic realization serves as breeding ground for democratic renewal. As the French writer of Irish descent Samuel Beckett eloquently put it<sup>1</sup>: “Ever tried. Ever failed. Never mind. Try again. Fail better.”

## Convergences

This book not only aims to deal critically with the conceptual contingency of participation but also with the diversity of participatory practices, forms, and appearances in the media. Of course, this diversity is again structured by the above mentioned minimalist–maximalist debate on democracy and participation. From a minimalist perspective, more emphasis is placed on the ritual and symbolic forms of participation, where the media are seen to be contributing to communality. Citizens frequently participate in (semi-)collective mediated rituals and surround themselves with (carriers of) meaning which construct their imagined communities. These meanings are not only communicated through the more obvious channels (e.g., newspapers and documentaries) but also through lesser ones (e.g., literature, soaps, reality TV, cartoons). In most cases, the participatory nature of these receptions (however active they may be) is relatively limited, and one may wonder whether the term (mediated or symbolic) interaction, or even mediated quasi-interaction (Thompson, 1995), is not more appropriate. From a more maximalist perspective, the focus is placed on the more intense forms of media participation, where nonprofessionals are effectively involved in the mediated production of meaning (content-related participation) or even in the management and policies of content producing organizations (structural participation).

In the history of mediated communication we can find many variations. If we consider the early years, it is not even that farfetched to view the many pamphlets as forms of media participation. The start-up phase of radio was also characterized by many examples of nonprofessional broadcasting. Not surprisingly, it was Bertolt Brecht’s radio theory (see Marc Silberman’s collection of essays by Brecht [2001])

that provides the foundations for the dream of the transformation of radio as a tool of distribution into a tool of communication. But especially from the 1990s onwards—and in some cases earlier, as for instance in the case of Hakim Bey's *TAZ* (1985)—the focus of theoreticians of participation shifted toward the so-called new media. The development of the internet, and especially the web, would not only render most information available to all but would also create a whole new world of communication, within its slipstream the promise of a structural increase of the level of (media) participation. Meanwhile, this dream seems to have come true, at least at first sight: while at first people still had to make the effort to construct their own web pages, the web 2.0 technologies now provide popular<sup>2</sup> and accessible ways to publish texts, images, and audiovisual material.

Inherent in the discourse of novelty that accompanies these evolutions are a number of substantial problems. We focus our attention on the participatory potential of new media, which leads us to ignore the capacities of old (Acland [2007] calls them “residual”) media. Suddenly newspaper, radio, and television appear to be media from the past century, not relevant enough to incorporate into debates on participation. This causes three crucial mistakes. Firstly, the cultural importance of the old media is underestimated tremendously. These old media still play an important role in the everyday lives of many people. Blinded by the futurist megalomania, and by the hope for a better future, the presence of the old media is often taken for granted. Secondly, the institutional nature of the present-day media worlds are equally often ignored. A vast number of media products is still produced by media companies, which are old top-down systems based on capitalist logics and not always in favor of the maximalist approaches towards participation and democracy. In this dazzling techno-optimism, we often forget that the routines, identities, practices, convictions and representations that circulate in the old media system have not been lost and still co-structure the new media system. Thirdly, the discourse of novelty feeds into the technological-determinist model, assuming that specific media technologies are per definition more participatory than others. Without wanting to underestimate the specificity of technologies, or without positioning them as “determined technologies” (Williams, 1974, p. 7), the participatory potential of media technologies remains dependent upon the way they are used. In practice, this means that web 2.0 technologies can be used perfectly in a top-down nonparticipatory way.

The caution expressed in the previous paragraph does not imply that we are blind to the participatory potential of old and new media

technologies for the increased diversity of these participatory practices, or for the increased technological interrelatedness often referred to as technological convergence. Blogging, vlogging, webzines, internet radio (and television), podcasting, digital storytelling, and wiki-ing are clear examples of these evolutions (see Gangadharan et al. [2007] for an alternative media perspective on these technologies).

Even in this enumeration, it is difficult to escape the technological angle, as all labels refer to specific technologies. Because of this focus, we tend to underestimate the importance of media producers and consumers. Firstly, networks ultimately consist of humans and nonhumans—of organisms, humans, and machines. Stated differently: for every cyberspace there is a cyberplace inhabited by media users who work and live in these places. In their own daily lives, within specific social contexts, they make use of specific media technologies. Secondly, these participatory processes (as mentioned before) are not guaranteed by specific technologies. Each technology can be used in a wide variety of ways, and its participatory nature is dependant on the power (im)balance between a professional media elite and the nonprofessionals who become involved, not by the technology as such. Thirdly, the use of these technologies, and their participatory potential, cannot be detached from their organizational component. Participation is organized and, in many cases, produced through the operations of (in)formal organizations. Even in the blogosphere the existence of the individual writer–publisher (the Author, in Barthes' [1984] terms) is a romantic illusion, because the blog-infrastructure is provided by a variety of organizations and companies. This organizational context is—as Henry Jenkins (2006) argues in *Convergence Culture*—largely a commercial and commodified context, which results in a combination of top-down business processes with bottom-up consumption and production processes. The existence of YouTube, with Google as its owner, is a case in point here.

Processes of convergence (which can also be considered blurrings of previously fixed categories) are of course not restricted to what is called technological convergence. Nor are they limited to what a political economy of the media can uncover. Contemporary practices of media participation are also embedded in processes of convergence at the level of text and audience. Not accidentally, the second part of this book is entitled *Images Sounds Texts*, in order to indicate that participation has now converged into a hybrid of technologies, genres, and formats. The title refers to Barthes' *Image Music Text* (1984), a book in which his semiotic analysis spans a wide variety of technologies (including film, photography, religious texts, literature, music, and theatre). But Barthes'

*Image Music Text* also contains the seminal essay *The Death of the Author*, which brings us to the last convergence we wish to discuss before briefly introducing the different chapters in this book. Barthes and others (e.g., Hall with his encoding–decoding model) pointed to the convergence between the producers and receivers of discourses at the level of interpretation. The death of the Author was a metaphor, not to be taken literally, implying that there was no privileged vantage point that fixed the interpretation of a text. Generating meaning was no longer the privilege of the producer of the discourse. To use Barthes' words: "Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (1984, p. 147). But now the Author is dying for a second time, as we witness a convergence between the producers and receivers of discourses at the level of the production process. The old Author is no longer solely in control of the production process, as the "produser" (e.g., Bruns, 2007) has overcome the rigid separations between both categories. Again, caution is recommended, as both convergences are not (and have never been) total. The audience is not hyperactive in its interpretative capabilities, which has protected some of the privileges of the Author. Nor is the audience hyperproductive in its capacity to produce content, which will again protect the Author. To stick to Barthes' metaphor: the Author will turn out to be a cat with more than nine lives.

## The Contents of the Book

The first part of the book—*Critiques*—contains three chapters, which provide us with a first broad overview of the problems related to (media) participation. Nick Couldry focuses on what he calls the crisis of voice, based on the problematic distance between the promises of voice implicitly made by political institutions and the actual voice that citizens are granted, a situation which is aggravated by the neoliberal policy consensus. Mark Deuze's focus on the corporate appropriation of participatory culture tackles the same problem from a different angle. He examines the diversity of strategies that corporations use to reclaim the web. Finally, Josh Lauer rearticulates the Marxist concept of alienation to theorize the construction of the consumer through contemporary surveillance techniques. These three chapters set the premise for the analyses rendered in part two of this book, making clear that all is not well in the world of participatory culture.

In the second part of the book—with the title *Images Sounds Text*—seven chapters each deal with a specific media technology in relation to

audiences and their participations. The first three chapters deal with texts. Gaye Tuchman and Stephen Ostertag analyze the democratic-participatory potential of blogs in the world of established media. Their conclusion: in the confrontation between the right to information and the right to turn a profit, the latter seems to be winning. Juanita Darling's chapter re-examines early Spanish American newspapers and the surprisingly high degree of participation they allowed for. But her point is also that the maturity of a media technology, which combines the increased sophistication of the technology combined with the establishment of a culture of professionalism, has reduced these participatory potentials over time. Isabel Awad raises the question of ownership in the Latina/o press. She points to the struggles that minority groups have to wage in order to gain and maintain control of their own press. Criticizing mimetic conceptualizations of the representation of minorities in largely mainstreamed media, she stresses the importance of self-representation for the empowerment of these groups.

The *Sound* part of the book combines two chapters. Robert Huesca's chapter analyses a series of radio training projects, concentrating on the fascinating variety of consequences for the participants. These consequences range from highly personal, individual outcomes over broader social and political impacts to practical career developments. The second chapter in this part slightly stretches the sound category by focusing on wifi. Seungyoon Lee and Arul Chib develop a framework for wireless initiatives connecting rural areas, emphasizing the importance of participation in technology and management.

The *Images* part of the book focuses on online video. Katja Wittke and Pat Aufderheide analyze *The War Tapes*, an independent participatory film project that involved members of a New Hampshire National Guard unit filming their experiences in Iraq. Tracing the reactions of both participants and audience members, their analysis provides an example of the interpenetrations and conflicts between traditional and citizen-fed web 2.0 media strategies. The second chapter of this part, written by Deborah Vance, looks at a series of YouTube films produced by faith-based and community groups involved in the reconstruction of New Orleans. She points to the rearticulation of the mainstream visual language in these films, whose hybrid narratives and visualizations maintain many intertextual links with the mainstream media but simultaneously add new and unexpected variations to the traditional vocabulary of the mainstream.

The final word of this book is left to Jay Rosen who, in "The People Formerly Known as the Audience," ponders over what is left of the audience. His point is that the audience has become more real, less

fictional, more able, and less predictable. This is the same point the entire volume makes: without accepting the participatory utopia at face value—and by uncovering the many restrictions, limitations, and sometimes perverse effects of participation—this book investigates the ongoing and never-ending power struggles that lie behind the concept and practice of participation and the media territories that the public is (rightfully) reclaiming.

Finally, we want to express our gratitude to Michael Haley and the entire ICA staff (and especially Michael West), to ICA-president Sonia Livingstone, to the authors that contributed to this book, to our copy-editor Matthew Katz, to Dan Zelinsky of the Musée Mécanique in San Francisco, to Seeta Peña Gangadharan, and to the CSP staff for making all this possible.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> In order to do history not too much injustice: Samuel Beckett wrote these oft-quoted words in relationship to the impossibility of art, not in relationship to democracy.

<sup>2</sup> The Technorati web site (<http://technorati.com/about/>) was tracking 103.2 million web sites on September 7, 2007.

**PART I:**  
**CRITIQUES**



# MEDIA AND THE PROBLEM OF VOICE

NICK COULDRY

## Introduction

If contemporary societies and the contemporary world are profoundly mediated, then the principal questions for media research must be guided by reference points outside media themselves. Media research must, paradoxically, become decentered (Couldry, 2006), so that it can ask more pertinent questions about what media do in wider social space. In a previous essay<sup>1</sup>, I proposed knowledge, agency and ethics—media’s contribution to sustaining, or undermining, each of them—as specific reference points for media research. But if media are, as I argued there, best understood “less . . . as a readily demarcated *site* [italics added] of analysis . . . and more as a force field within a complex space of social practice,”<sup>2</sup> then we need also to reflect on the large-scale pressures affecting that force field.

One such pressure is the growing problem—even crisis—of voice affecting many aspects of contemporary life. In this chapter, I want to sketch an outline of that crisis before suggesting, in conclusion, how that crisis might affect where specifically we choose to stand in studying the dynamics of today’s media and communications field. At that point, the necessity of a decentered approach to researching media should become even clearer: Media institutions are no less implicated in this crisis of voice than political or economic institutions.

The thought-process behind this chapter began in May 2006, when Sonia Livingstone, Tim Markham, and I completed our book on nearly 3 years of intensive research into how and how far people’s media consumption contributes to their sense of *public connection*, that is their orientation to a world of public issues requiring public resolution (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007). Satisfyingly, perhaps, our research confirmed that most people in the UK do have public connection, and this connection is mediated, although we also realised it is always difficult to reach those who are intensely disconnected through research techniques that, inevitably, intrude upon their disconnection. Yet many of the diarists most engaged with media in our study doubted, it seemed, the point of being an engaged news-consuming citizen if their engagement

was never recognized by the state in the course of the political process. As one diarist, a 47-year-old senior health protection nurse from England's rural Midlands, expressed it, "It's all right having a duty and following things but is there a point if there's nothing at the end of it?"

We suddenly saw that the real issue about the undoubted long-term decline in engagement in formal electoral politics in the UK and elsewhere—anxiously debated by leading political scientists (Pharr & Putnam, 2000; Putnam 2002)—was not so much a "motivation crisis" (Habermas, 1988, p. 78) on the part of citizens, although trust in politicians is undoubtedly low. The real issue was a "a recognition crisis, a gap between what citizens do, or would like to do, and the state's recognition of what they do" (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2007, p. 189). That recognition crisis can also be formulated as a crisis of voice.

Political institutions are formally required to offer voice (the chance for populations to have a say in decisions that affect them), and embody voice, at some level, if as "representative" institutions they are to have any democratic legitimacy. But delivering voice requires more than the state having a formal mechanism where elected representatives speak for large populations in decision-making, since that representative mechanism must itself have legitimacy. The legitimacy of a representative mechanism depends at least on whether it achieves an adequate relationship between two levels of discourse: the state's decision making and the everyday processes whereby those affected by decisions have voice (i.e., express their opinions and give an account of themselves and the basis for their opinions). Otherwise, political institutions will not appear to deliver or embody voice. This, I suggest, emerges increasingly in many advanced democracies today, resulting in a crisis of voice, where states remain compelled to offer voice but are increasingly unable to deliver it in any meaningful form.

This deficit—the offer or invocation of voice by powerful institutions, and its simultaneous withdrawal—can be seen not just in the political field, but in the economic and cultural fields also (as I explain shortly). It may seem reckless to attempt an argument that will span hugely complex transformations in contemporary politics, economics, and culture, but the benefit is that we see more clearly how across a number of domains one underlying value (the value of voice) is being systematically both invoked and denied, generating a long-term and large-scale crisis of voice in which media institutions must be implicated. In a short chapter, I cannot develop this argument conclusively, of course; my aim, simply, is to suggest how a sense of that impending crisis of voice should affect our priorities for media research in the next decade.

## **Voice in a Relocated Politics?**

I will return later to the specific crisis of voice in some neoliberal democracies, but it is only fair first to recognize that such local difficulties occur within the frame of a broader crisis about where and how democratic politics can now be constituted.

For some time Ulrich Beck has argued that politics must be reinvented, not least because of globalization:

What happens to territorially bounded politics in world society? How do collective binding decisions become possible under post-national conditions? Will politics wither away? Or will it undergo a transformation? (2000, p. 90)

Saskia Sassen more recently argued, drawing on a huge amount of empirical evidence, that we can see the scale of politics being redefined both within and beyond the nation (Sassen, 2006). Putting to one side Beck's vision of a "cosmopolitan project" (Beck, 2000), let us focus on the more immediate practical and normative implications of this transformation. Acknowledging politics beyond the hierarchical spaces of nation-states changes the terms on which politics operate. In part, this is a matter of greater reflexivity within the practice of politics, a new "politics of politics" (Beck, 1997, p. 99). But changing the possible scales of political action cuts across the very power relations on which the state, as container of social action and political authority, is based. This has major implications for the representative status of politics, and political institutions' capacity to deliver voice effectively. So Beck's "methodological cosmopolitanism" (2000) goes hand in hand with a "meta-transformation" in contemporary politics, a shift in its "foundations and basic concepts of power and domination, legitimacy and virtue" (Beck, 2005, p. xii).

This shift becomes much more than theoretical when focused by the practical questions of representation. By "representation" here I mean both representation in the formal political sense—representation by delegation in particular processes of decision making—and representation in the broader sense of symbolisation, the two aspects being linked. For if, as I argued, political institutions can only deliver voice if there is some adequation between what, for short-hand, I will call the decision-making process and everyday voice, then the achievement of voice must involve more than the mere existence of formal mechanisms of delegation. It matters also how those affected by decisions (who are to be formally represented) are recognized in the narratives told by or in relation to the

state, including by media. Here major new problems arise. Intensified economic migration (e.g., across and within the borders of Europe or across the U.S.–Mexican border) raises questions of representation (in both senses) that cannot be resolved within the established logics of national politics. Contemporary transnational politics raises second-order questions of justice about “the relations of representation” that indicate “who is included in, and who excluded from, the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition” in particular political spaces (Fraser, 2005, p. 75). The problem is that existing polities—and our nation-centred concept of the public sphere—are just not ready to answer such questions.

As a result, a new “politics of representation . . . must . . . aim to democratize the process of frame-setting” (Fraser, 2005, p. 80). *Frame setting* means the process of determining who is represented as within, or beyond, the boundaries of citizen membership for political purposes; by definition, therefore, it involves processes of representation-as-symbolisation (i.e., discourses about who is fit to be given formal representation-by-delegation). Correcting current injustices of representation means recognising the voices of those excluded by political systems and—implicitly, although it is not Fraser’s concern to develop this—excluded by media systems which, of course, intensively represent (symbolise) the boundaries of political representation (formal delegation). It also means reflecting on whether the level of participation embodied by representative mechanisms is adequate to deliver voice, or whether it needs to be expanded. There is a gap here in the institutional frameworks of politics. This could be a moment of huge potential when, as Etienne Balibar argued, developing Beck, “a politics of politics [should] aim . . . at creating, recreating, and conserving the set of conditions within which politics as a collective participation in public affairs is possible, or at least is not made absolutely impossible” (Balibar, 2004, p. 114). Or, picking up on the pessimism at the end of Balibar’s words, this could be a profound practical crisis where voice—democratically adequate representation—is both offered and fails to be delivered in a transnational politics whose form, as yet, is hardly defined, let alone institutionally embodied.

### **The Specific Crisis of Neoliberal Democracies**

If the first aspect of the crisis of voice is ambiguous in its implications—is it serious representational deficit or useful stimulus to rethink the scale and aims of politics?—the second aspect is more unambiguously negative, once we pierce the rhetoric of freedom that

disguises it. This is the erosion of effective democracy within states that have adopted the neoliberal policy consensus.

Neoliberal doctrine (i.e., the discourse that prioritises market functioning above all other values within political, social and economic organization) has over the past 20 years become embodied in a new form of national politics that Colin Leys calls “market-driven politics” (2001). Leys’ rich account of its emergence identifies three factors which reduced the opportunities for challenge to the consequences of neoliberal doctrine.

First, various interlocking factors have drastically reduced the influence of national governments over national economies, leading to an “internationalised state” (2001, p. 13). The liberalisation of capital flows, the liberalisation of ownership of national financial sectors, and the huge growth in capital markets lead to massively increased trading on global financial markets and (just as important) the facilitation and huge growth in foreign direct investment through increased mobility of capital and faster communications. The national state is, in most situations, now considerably weaker in bargaining power and financial muscle than most transnational corporations, and in all situations massively weaker than global capital and foreign exchange markets. National governments now have diminishing influence over economic policy in their own territories and face increasing pressures to adopt towards policies specifically favourable to markets. Policies that markets do not like attract a “political premium” in the bond markets, with immediate and drastic consequences for national governments’ costs of borrowing (2001, pp. 22-23). These various influences are barely negotiable.

Second, there are the factors which have made social relations in countries such as Britain more “adapted” to these external market forces: the British state’s divestment during the 1980s and 1990s of its assets and its dispersal into smaller departments and a mass of state agencies; the de-democratisation of political parties and local government; and what Leys, perhaps more contentiously, sees as the embedding of market ideology in everyday life. Here Leys’ analysis links closely with Rose’s (1996) analysis of the de-governmentalisation of the state through the expansion, among other things, of audit culture. The result, Leys argues, is a profound shift in the texture and purpose of politics: “politics are no longer about managing the economy to satisfy the demands of voters, they are increasingly about getting voters to endorse policies that meet the demands of capital” (2001, p. 68). Even if citizens wanted to challenge the underlying priority given to market principles by governments, this would be difficult because of the biases towards market-friendly policies now built into the national political setting.

The result of market-driven politics is that national democratic systems become less able, even in principle, to deliver voice (e.g., in reflecting popular unease over policies that affect the provision of public services or the allocation of public resources, or the conditions experienced by citizens at, or in the pursuit of, work). This occurs even as, for other reasons, governments must continue to offer voice, as condition of their basic legitimacy but also (e.g., for UK's New Labour) in fulfillment of their populist rhetoric and historical legacy.

This localised crisis of voice applies not just to the external relations between government and citizens, but affects the internal processes of government itself. The adoption of audit as the primary tool of policy monitoring and social-economic management has its own antidemocratic consequences. According to the leading analyst of audit culture, Michael Power:

The audit process requires trust in experts and is not a basis for rational public deliberation. It is a dead end in the claim of accountability . . . more accounting and auditing does not necessarily mean more and better accountability . . . and [yet] *it expresses the promise of accountability . . . but this promise is at best ambiguous* [italics added]: the fact of being audited deters public curiosity and inquiry. . . . Audit is in this respect a substitute for democracy rather than its aid. (Power, 1997, p. 127)

The disappearance, in Britain certainly, of substantive political debate over the validity of market-driven policies coincides with governments' increasing implication in an accelerating news cycle, undermining the possibility of policy deliberation even within government itself. Here are the reflections of a senior civil servant who served under the Blair and preceding administrations in Britain:

We no longer had . . . the time or the capability to be thorough enough to explain to ourselves, to Parliament and the public just what we were attempting, and therefore to make reasonably sure what was practical and would work. (Foster, 2005, p. 1-2)

If, as Leys and many others have argued, the same is true within public services and in public services' dealings with their users, then a crisis of voice at many levels in neoliberal democracies perhaps justifies Henry Giroux's diagnosis: "underneath neoliberalism's corporate ethic and market-based fundamentalism, not only is the idea of democracy disappearing but the spaces in which democracy is produced and nurtured are being eliminated" (2006, p. 25).