

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives of Media and Citizenship

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INTRODUCTION

Citizenship has long been connected to communication media. Popular media have been both the relay points between the governing and the governed for purposes of developing nations and citizen identities as well as the places for articulating discontent with the unjust, illegitimate, or unpopular uses of public authority. Yet, one often struggles to find reference to the significance of media to the formation of citizenship practices and identities, particularly in mainstream political science literature. It has been largely in the field of cultural history, through the work of authors such as Benedict Anderson (1991) and Michael Schudson (1994), that a conception of citizenship is linked explicitly to the technologies and institutions of media communication.

BACKGROUND: HISTORICAL-NORMATIVE APPROACHES TO MEDIA AND CITIZENSHIP

Modern forms of governance rest upon mediated interaction rather than upon direct speech and face-to-face communication, due to the size, complexity, and diversity of modern nation-states. This was observed by classical philosophers of modernity such as Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel, who recognized the relationship between the means of expression of ideas and the popular imaginary. Kant defined the public use of reason as “that use which anyone may make of it as a man of learning addressing the entire reading public” (Kant, 1971, p. 55), while Hegel described “reading the morning paper [as] a kind of realistic morning prayer” (quoted in Donald, 1998, p. 219). The concept of citizenship has been important to media studies, particularly since the early 1990s, where it provided a way of thinking about media outside of the market-vs.-state dichotomy. Using T. H. Marshall’s (1992) historical typology of civil, political, and social citizenship, Golding and Murdock (1989) proposed that communication policies that guaranteed citizenship rights would:

1. Maximize access to information, particularly in areas most relevant to the rights of citizens;
2. Provide all sections of the community with the broadest possible range of information, interpretation, and debate on issues; and
3. Allow people from all sections of society to recognize themselves in the representations offered in communication media and to be able to contribute to the development and shaping of these representations.

The necessary conditions for communication and information systems to achieve such goals are maximum possible diversity of provision, mechanisms for user feedback and participation, and universal access to services, regardless of income, geographical location, or social situation.

The relationship between media and citizenship has been discussed in three key approaches. The first is the liberal media theory and the idea of the media as a Fourth Estate. This theory has its origins in the American and French Revolutions of the late 18th century and sees the role of the media in modern liberal-democratic societies as the guardians of the rights and liberties of citizens in the face of unaccountable or irresponsible exercises of institutional power. In order to do this, the media must be free from government control or domination, and journalists must be willing to assert their roles as defenders of the public interest in the face of challenges from the executive, parliamentary, or judicial estates of government (Schultz, 1998; Siebert, 1963).

A recurring difficulty for liberal or Fourth Estate media theories in relation to citizenship is that of reconciling the formal equality of senders and receivers in the communication marketplace with substantive inequalities in access to material resources to influence public opinion due to the concentration of ownership of the most influential media among a diminishing number of powerful corporate interests. In other words, since liberal societies are also capitalist societies, the dynamics of capitalism as they impact upon the media (including concentration of ownership and control, class-based and other social inequalities).

ties, commodification, and the intertwining of economic and political power) serve to undermine the capacity of commercial media to realize the citizenship principles associated with the ideals of the Fourth Estate (Curran, 1991). Schultz has referred to the difficulty of maintaining the watchdog role of journalism, in which it is increasingly “bound by the paradox of holding its head in politics while its feet are grounded in commerce” (Schultz, 1998, p. 45).

The second approach to media and citizenship is the critical media theory and its understanding of the role of the media in the public sphere. Critical media theorists also believe in the emancipatory possibilities of media to realize full citizenship but are concerned, as noted previously, with the degree to which media institutions are enmeshed within wider structures of political and economic power. The argument was developed most forcefully in Jürgen Habermas’ (1977) historical-normative analysis of the public sphere. The public sphere emerged in early 18th-century Western Europe as a site independent of the church or the state. Habermas (1977) depicted this as an ideal forum in which media would be read and discussed among groups, and its wider ramifications would be debated and acted upon. While such a bourgeois public sphere was central to the rise of capitalism and the weakening of aristocratic and royal authority, its decline in the 19th and 20th centuries arose from trends also linked to capitalism, including the concentration of corporate control over media industries, the rise of advertising and public relations, and the growing role of the state in communication management.

While public sphere media theories often have incorporated a tragic (Dahlgren, 1995; Garnham, 1990) account of the relationship of media to citizenship in liberal-capitalist societies, they also have drawn attention to the positive role that the state can play in fostering citizen identities. Rather than seeing the state as the would-be enemy of personal freedoms and citizens’ rights, as liberal media theory tends to do, public sphere theories draw attention to the positive and enabling roles that the state can play in fostering access, diversity, pluralism, and participation, either through media regulation or through directly funding public service or community-based media. Garnham (1990) has argued that because public service broadcasting operates according to a political rather than a purely economic logic, it is best placed to develop elements of a contemporary public sphere, as it can provide opportunities for a public dialogue to occur that incorporates the widest diversity of ideas and opinions.

A third, quite distinctive understanding of the media-citizenship relationship was developed by John Hartley (1996, 1999) in his analysis of media’s role in cultural citizenship and do-it-yourself (DIY) citizenship. Hartley (1996, 1999) proposes that popular culture, particularly, journalism, develops an understanding of modern forms

of political citizenship among its consumers, since media are the relay points between the institutions of authority (governmental, educational, and cultural institutions) and the broader population, who is increasingly constituted of readers, or users of media, as levels of literacy grow. Rejecting both a tragic account of the relationship between media and citizenship in liberal-capitalist societies and a distinction between quality and popular media (i.e., public service and commercial media), Hartley (1996, 1999) proposes that what media do best is cross-demographic communication, enabling people to understand both each other and the wider communities in which they exist. As consumerism and identity politics become increasingly significant in late-modern societies, Hartley argues that we are seeing a move from mass media that cater to mass society and adherence to a national culture (what he terms *cultural citizenship*) toward what he terms *DIY-citizenship*. In this emergent form of citizenship, there has been an increasing blurring of the lines between media producers and consumers due both to audience fragmentation in multi-channel media environments and to the self-production of media through new digital technologies.

BARRIERS TO MEDIA CITIZENSHIP THROUGH THE INTERNET

Although the Internet as a form of communication media offers considerable potential to overcome barriers to full citizenship, significant obstacles remain, nonetheless. Moreover, taking a sociotechnical rather than a purely technology-based approach to the medium, it is apparent that many of these barriers are social, political, and economic in nature, and cannot be overridden by purely technical means. History also has demonstrated that there can be a lag of up to 50 years between the potential of a new technology becoming apparent and institutional and organizational changes that enable the potential of that new technology to be fully realized (David, 1999).

Early accounts of the democratic potential of the Internet clearly understated the capacity for corporate power to undercut the democratizing and egalitarian potential of new media. While much of the focus of Net activism of the 1990s was upon preventing governments from controlling Internet content, it became apparent that companies such as Microsoft could establish virtual monopolies over the provision of office-based software to the detriment of competition and innovation in the new media environment. Moreover, the extension of existing intellectual property regimes into the digital domain and the globalization of these regimes through international trade agreements has threatened the public-good elements of networked online information (Perelman, 2002;

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