




Television and Popular Civic Cultures: Public Sphere Perspectives¹

Peter Dahlgren - Lund University

With a focus on television, this text explores the conceptual tensions between popular culture and politics. Traditional notions of the public sphere are augmented with perspectives on civic cultures, which underscores, among other things, agency, identity and practices. Also, John Ellis' notion of television as a socio-cultural and political 'working through' serves as a useful analytic link for understanding how the popular can feed into the political. The text mobilizes and compares contributions and arguments from several different authors, who stress that the radical bifurcation between politics and the popular leads us into a dead-end. At the same time, we do ourselves a disservice if we simply try to collapse one side into the other; we have to live creatively with the tension, reminding ourselves that neither politics nor popular culture are static phenomena. The final section strives to frame this viewpoint in terms of the several dimensions of the civic cultures.

¹ This text appears, in a slightly different form, in my book *Media and Political Engagement*, from Cambridge University Press, New York, 2009.




In this article I will be examining television in terms of its popularity and its contribution to citizens' involvement with politics. To this end I will in part relate these concerns to the traditional notion of the public sphere and update my earlier perspectives on that theme (Dahlgren 1995). Also, I'll be using the angle of civic cultures (Dahlgren 2009) and draw upon a number of recent contributions to the discussions on politics and popular culture.

The concept of the public sphere remains a central analytic construct in our ongoing efforts to understand the relationship between democracy and the media. And television remains the dominant medium for most people in Western democracies, despite the profound communication revolution associated with the internet. Yet the conceptual premises of the public sphere become all the more problematic, as the media, with television in the vanguard, seemingly drift ever further in the direction of entertainment and consumption. How do we orient ourselves in this regard via the concept of the public sphere? How does the popular quality of television resonate with notions of public spheres and civic cultures?

The discussion consists of three parts. First, with a focus on television, I take up the more general debates around the relationship between popular culture and politics. In particular I find John Ellis' (2000) notion of television as a socio-cultural and political 'working through' to be a handy reference point. In the second section, I examine and draw together several different contributions and arguments, stressing that the traditional bifurcation between politics on the one hand, and popular culture and entertainment on the other, leads us into a dead-end. At the same time, we do ourselves an analytic disservice when at the same time we ignore the real tensions between them. The final section strives to frame this viewpoint in terms of the several dimensions of the civic cultures perspective.

Processing the proto-political

I find that Ellis' (2000) view of contemporary television provides a useful frame in regard to the issues at hand. His idea of television as a socio-cultural working through (the term comes from Freud) has some antecedents in television studies. Fiske and Hartley's (1978) model of 'bardic television' underscores the cultural processing of collective experience via televisual storytelling. In a similar manner, Newcomb's (2000[1984]) idea of television as a 'cultural forum' also offers a way of thinking about television as a site where the values and social visions embedded in the programmes can confront each other. Ellis' update realistically incorporates the basic attributes of the medium, takes seriously its public functions, is sociologically well anchored, and avoids the pitfalls of the extreme conceptual positions. While allying himself with the idea of television's potential for extending the public sphere, as illustrated by Scannell, he is also fully aware of the critiques of this position. Ellis talks of television as a 'working through', of television not providing any




ultimate or definitive point of view, but rather offering its viewers vast amounts of transitory glimpses, preliminary meanings, multiple frameworks, explanations, and narrative structures for processing basic private as well as public concerns, many times touching upon topics that are, if not fully political, at least insipient, or proto-political. These may or may not at times coalesce as concrete political issues; often they remain at the level of perceptions and values.

Television is largely oriented towards the present moment, towards the experiential rather than the analytic, towards the personal rather than the structural. Also, though Ellis does not make a major point of it, his approach avoids the unproductive polarization of the rational and the affective. In our everyday lives we make sense of our experiences, ourselves, and the world around us largely using a combination of our head and our heart, as I discussed in Chapter 4 of *Media and Political Engagement* (2009). There is no reason why we should - or even could - function any differently when we find ourselves connected to public spheres.

As he puts it, 'Television attempts definitions, tries out explanations, creates narratives, talks over, makes intelligible, harnesses speculation, tries to make fit, and, very occasionally, anthematizes' (Ellis 2000: 79). In the meanings that television offers viewers, uncertainty prevails over certainty; there is a perennial tentativeness in the voice of television. One can grasp this in the broad debates and many positions around programs such as *The Sopranos* and *Sex and the City* - which in my view echoes some of Fiske's (1988) arguments about the importance of polysemy for popularity, i.e. that the popularity of popular culture resides to some extent in its many meanings, which evoke different interpretations from different groups.

This working through operates via all genres and their hybrids, but is predicated on viewer familiarity with generic formulas as a key vehicle for the communication of meaning (Johansson (2006) finds that readers of British tabloid press use these newspapers in ways very similar to what Ellis describes). Such a view does not preclude mechanisms of mainstreaming; however, the perspective of working through underscores television's attributes of polysemy and uncertainty. Such openness means that hegemony is always loose, leaky, and at risk - and can thus in principle be discursively challenged by audiences whose processes of working through may deviate from established hegemonic patterns of interpretation.

Television's working through can take intensely politicized turns, as it has done in the post 9/11 era in the U.S. Yet the point of the working through perspective is that much of the meanings offered up are anchored in a transitory present; new issues and angles will emerge, there will always be a bit more cacophony than coherence - at least on the surface level that is most immediately relevant for opinions, attitudes and practices. The more deeply rooted ideological dimensions are less transitory in character, and can be




mobilized in new contexts, as new issues arise. However, even political rhetoric based on deep ideological dimensions can diminish in their impact: for example, the grip that the Bush administration's patriotic post 9/11 rhetoric had on the U.S. political climate has loosened somewhat over the years.

We can briefly contrast Ellis' view with that of Scheuer (2001), who makes the argument that there is a conservative, right-wing bias in television's modes of representation. In this analysis the tendency toward personalizing, dichotomizing, placing style above substance, the emotional and physical above the intellectual and the moral, and the general aversion towards complexity, all serve to support social and political conservatism. While it is true, for instance, that the medium tends not to promote analytic response, and that personification and psychologism may work against perspectives of collective well-being and responsibility, it strikes me that this type of reading flounders precisely in its adherence to a traditional textual rationality.

One can certainly appreciate Scheuer's sense of exasperation with television, and it cannot be denied that the modes of representation he criticizes often indeed carry a deeply conservative import (one need only look at Fox News). However, I see no deterministic imperative that in principle precludes using such modes for progressive messages (in the border zone between journalism and comedy, *The Daily Show* does just that). Rather, I would here refer to the external social forces that impact on the contemporary output of television to explain its ideological slant - political power arrangements and economic mechanisms. His call for better 'media literacy' - to be taught in the schools and elsewhere - to enhance 'critical viewing' would no doubt lead to increasingly media-critical audiences. Yet, this appeal to education misses something essential about television's cultural power, and its capacity to engage at the affective level.

At a fundamental level, what is at stake in the public sphere perspective is the question of where the political resides - where social conflict is articulated and processed - and how it is positioned against that which is deemed non-political. As I have noted, the traditional view from both public sphere theory and political communication has been to maintain a strict boundary between the rational and the affective, and by extension, between serious current affairs information and entertainment. Yet, in the notion of television serving to work through various issues via its entertainment programming, providing a daily environment where topics are raised, become contested, and take on the character of the political or at least the proto-political, this boundary begins to loosen up. Thus, the ongoing televisual treatment of value conflicts having to do with premarital sex, sexual preference, abortion, gene manipulation, inter-ethnic relations, etc. in such diverse genres as dramatic series, soap opera, reality TV, talk shows, situation comedies, and comic monologues, all are indicative of television's blurring of this basic dichotomy.



It would of course be difficult to calibrate television's exact impact here, not least because of the flowing, meandering character of themes and issues across time, yet to belittle its significance seems simply erroneous. In the case of certain identity politics, for instance, seen in the long-term of the working through perspective, many of the issues raised and positions taken by various groups found their way into television and achieved visibility and enhanced legitimacy, not least via entertainment programs. For example, the sitcom *All in the Family* from the 1970's, with its main character the working class bigot Archie Bunker, through its humour and irony challenged discriminatory views on gay people and racial prejudice, as well as problematizing the traditional view on women's social position. (I realize that critics pointed to a certain polysemy here - that viewers who agreed with Archie could get their prejudices validated - but I would argue that in the long run the program served to undermine those positions).

At the time, the controversies the program touched upon could reverberate with considerable electricity. More than three decades on, the visibility and legitimacy of, for example, gay men and lesbian women on television has been enormously enhanced. This is not to say that social discrimination or the oppression of homosexual people are things of the past, but in terms of television's representations in these areas, the public sphere has been transformed, and the centre of normative gravity has certainly shifted in society at large. The underlying assumptions that might frame specific issues relating to homosexuality today (for example in regard to the right to adopt children) depart from a different set of societal dispositions that television helped engender at the popular level.

Popular engagement


We thus have to take seriously television's popularity, and consider how in its largely unHabermasian modes it can promote - as well as constrict - public spheres. What has been emerging in this chapter is the importance of popular horizons, especially as mediated via television, in the life of democracy. The culturalist view underscores the importance of looking beyond news and other forms of traditional political communication, in a sense to treat the realm of popular culture as bearing relevance for democratic life. Simons expresses the view cogently: '[...] there is a structural and necessary relation between the popularisation of culture and the democratisation of politics [...]' (Simons 2003: 186-7). How far should we extend this perspective? What is at stake in our understanding of the relationship between popular culture and political processes?

Politics and popular culture: border-crossings

The boundary between them has long been well defended, since it has been assumed that letting popular culture 'leak into' politics will just subvert the whole enterprise of democracy and citizenship. Certainly feminists have long made the point that the private realm is not a priori devoid of political issues. In recent years, scholars working in media research and cultural studies have been recasting the relationship between politics and popular culture, trying to probe and clarify this link in new ways. Some studies in this area highlight the analytic trajectories that are now in motion. Several contributions in the collection by Corner and Pels (2003), for example, reject the firm division between these two domains, stressing the significance of the aesthetics of political image, style and performance, with much of it being borrowed from popular culture and orchestrated by spin and PR. Thus, for example, politicians can take on an aura of 'celebrity', equivalent to the stars of popular culture. In the shift away from emphasizing party ideology, the political style of the individual politician becomes central to how audiences experience them and evaluate their performance, authenticity, and political capabilities.

More broadly, Street (1997) suggests in a manner similar to Ellis that 'Popular culture neither manipulates us nor mirrors us; instead we live through it and with it [...] our lives are bound up with it' (Street 1997: 4). This posits what we might call an undeniable base relevance of popular culture for political life: moral judgments are operative in culture, cultural values have relevance for politics, identities, emerge within both domains. Popular culture offers images and symbols that express and evoke emotion, that we use not least in shaping our individual and collective identities, our sense of who we are, what is right, important, and so forth. These can certainly be pertinent for how politics operate and what political views emerge. Modern politics, in turn, often makes use of, is expressed via, forms and languages of popular culture.

There is a fundamental logic linking the two spheres, having to do with 'the way in which notions of representation, the people, popularity, and identity are shared between them' (Street 1997: 21). In this linkage, passion and pleasure are always present, mobilized and manifested often in very similar ways. Street structures the argument clearly: on the one hand popular culture feeds into politics, on the other hand politics often takes the form of popular culture. In the first case, he provides many examples of how popular culture takes on political character, and impacts on the political imagination: rock music at times expressing political resistance, or galvanizing public opinion for aid relief, movies addressing political themes, television programs doing exactly what Ellis (2000) says they do in working through important social issues, individual icons of popular culture taking a political stance, audiences making use of popular culture in developing particular identity positions in regard to, for example, gender or ethnicity. He stresses not least how popular culture can contribute to the redefinition of what constitutes politics, often




extending notions of the political into the private sphere of personal relations and group contexts (today docu-soaps can serve as a telling illustration).

In the second case, looking in the other direction, Street (1997) shows how politics takes on the forms of popular culture, as politicians and party machines resort to the same kinds of advertising strategies used to market commodities, as well as the image management associated with celebrities. Political leaders associate themselves in various ways with stars from popular culture (e.g. Bono), appear together with them, and even use popular culture formats at times in communicating with citizens, such as appearing on entertainment shows. There is of course an established school of thought that reacts vehemently to all such forms of political packaging, and while acknowledging the ever-potential problems, Street avoids simple, blanket condemnation. He invites us to instead look at these developments in the larger contexts of modern culture, mediated politics, and the options available for communicating to large audiences. In particular he asserts that it is important to distinguish the political substance from the forms of packaging, and concludes the book by emphasizing the continual need to make judgments - in politics and popular culture. And he reminds us that such judgments are always political.

Politics as engaging entertainment?

Extending these lines of argument, van Zoonen (2005) further opens the gates by suggesting that politics can be made more accessible - and in a sense more democratic - by linking up with popular culture, by putting pleasure more at the forefront. Van Zoonen argues that it is particularly via personalization and dramatization (via key dramaturgical frames such as the quest, bureaucracy, conspiracy and soap) that popular culture can serve as a resource for political citizenship; these dimensions can not only help convey politics but also offer tools for reflecting on what citizenship can and should mean, as well as providing mechanisms for the enactment of politics by citizens. Thus, popular culture can process and communicate collective experience, emotion, even knowledge; it offers opportunities for negotiating views and opinions on contested values as well as explicit political issues. It can therefore serve as a form of what we might call 'meta-deliberation', adding (but certainly not replacing) different forms of expression, different registers, different emotional spectra to the more traditional forms of news and political communication. Lunt and Stenner's (2005) analysis of the *Jerry Springer Show* as an 'emotional public sphere' neatly illustrates this line of thinking.

Further she underscores the close similarities between political engagement and pop cultural fandom (see also Gray 2007). Fans invest avid emotional involvement and symbolic valence into the objects of their attention, deriving great pleasure from it and not seldom also taking a playful stance towards this object, be it a person/icon, a television series, or whatever. Van Zoonen




relates these traits to citizenship, noting the structural similarities between fan cultures and publics, each with their shared sense of values and willingness to engage in collective action. In highlighting the similarities, she does not suggest a complete equivalence, nor does she mean that fan cultures should or could replace political constituencies. Rather, her point is that by using the model of fan cultures, we can better understand some of the major mechanisms at work in politics, such as fantasy, imagination, and emotional intensity (the latter being very visible, at for example, political rallies).

Variants of the ‘working through’ perspective thus need not be per se restricted to just television but could be attributed to all kinds of mediated popular culture. Yet, it is in television programming where political life is perhaps most often explicitly interpreted by entertainment - i.e. ‘politicainment’. The collection by Reigert (2007), offers a number of analyses of such programs, but also analyses of how the changing character of television’s political economy, the growth of participatory technologies, and various forms of ‘voting’ in popular programming continue to develop. An analysis of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* is also included, (while a longer treatment of that show and other new forms of political comedy by the same author can be found in Jones 2005). The humour is based on parodies of established forms of political communication that strip away artifice, highlight inconsistencies, and generally challenge the authority of official political discourse. This offers pleasurable ports of entry to current political topics, while also contributing to the evolution of mediated political culture.

Another very suggestive angle on engagement in popular culture and its political relevance, with a focus on young people, is found in Stephen Coleman’s (2006, 2007a, 2007b) research on *Big Brother* in the UK. Based on his studies of young fans of this reality TV series, he concludes first that we need to understand present disengagement from traditional party politics less as a question of them abandoning the political system and instead consider how the system has abandoned and/or excluded them. The way parliamentary politics is represented - especially on television - clearly contributes to disengaging many young citizens.

Secondly, and still more provocative from the standpoint of traditional political communication, he argues that forms of popular entertainment are also offering topics that engage young viewers in ways that must be understood as political, thereby redefining what ‘politics’ is. His young viewers did have the capability to follow the news, critically reflect on politics, and participate in elections. Many in fact did so, ‘but they often felt themselves to be outsiders in someone else’s story’ (Coleman 2006: 27). They felt they had little political efficacy. Instead, they found on *Big Brother* (and in many other media spaces) a large range of topics that engaged them, such as ‘debates about asylum seekers, inequality, cheating, bullying, anarchism, sexual identity, religious fundamentalism, and war [...]’ (Coleman 2006: 26).




For Coleman, this indicates the ‘hopelessly narrow conception of politics’ that still prevails, one that ignores the concerns people have in their daily lives, such as ethics, identity, justice, taboos, social power relations, and an endless range of topics about the world beyond face-to-face settings. The problem in part has to do with the establishment’s political agenda: politicians seem unable to take up many issues that engage the young, while the issues they offer do not resonate deeply with such audiences. But it is also a problem of communication, of modes of representation and expression. Coleman suggests that much traditional political communication is out of step with the new generations and their media cultures. He thus argues for the need for enhanced double transparency: to make established politics more visible, compelling and accessible to the young, while at the same time politicians need to know about, be better anchored in, the realities of young people. Such developments would involve a further decentralization of political communication - and no doubt of political power as well.

These kinds of challenging ideas receive a sort of overarching framework in the notion of cultural citizenship as recently developed by Hermes (2005). In noting that ‘popular culture’ is much more popular than ‘politics’ - with ‘popular’ meaning basically of and for the people - she probes the civic qualities of popular culture and highlights a number of key attributes in this regard. Cultural citizenship as a perspective underscores the democratic potential of popular culture, while allowing that it often may not always be realized. This potential lies largely in its capacity to join us together: popular culture makes us feel welcome and offers us a sense of belonging. It sets up few barriers, and thus can permit easy engagement. Also, it invites us to fantasize about the ideals and hopes we have for society, as well as to process things that we fear. That is, as in Ellis’ approach, cultural citizenship sees popular culture as having relevance for identity construction, ideology, and norms, aiding us to work through important contemporary ideas and issues.

Popular culture also provides guidelines for the interpretation and evaluation of actions and experiences, while also offering sites for an extensive range of emotional and mental states - while offering lots of pleasure. In short: ‘Cultural citizenship is the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in partaking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating and criticising offered in the realm of (popular) culture’ (Hermes 2005: 10).

We should also note that there is another critical perspective on the bonding, community building, sense-making, and so on associated with engagement in popular culture. While not troubled by the dimension of affect per se, this line of critical analysis reacts against the top-down, indeed, industrial character of the mobilisation of affect, which is particularly applicable to television. While perhaps evoking some difficult issues in the implicit references to something more ‘authentic’, authors such as De Bord (2006[1967]) and Baudrillard (1995) alert us to the orchestrated character of mass mediated culture and its



problematic outcomes. However, there are two modifying elements here. The first is the history of audience reception analysis, which ‘rehabilitates’ the viewer as a participant in the processes of experience and sense-making vis-à-vis television. The other is the new media technology: it could be argued that the increasingly horizontal, participatory character of much popular culture today facilitates more bottom-up affect, and thus at least partly modifies some of the conditions that generated this kind of critique.

Television, popular culture, and civic cultures

Television news in its traditional guise contributes to the public sphere in complex ways, while at the same manifesting a number of significant limitations, not least that it offers very few entry points for civic identity and agency (which in turn both derives from and reflects the dilemmas of power relations in contemporary democracy). As we move beyond news programs and look at television in broader terms, and at popular culture more generally, we find degrees of political relevance emerging in ways quite at variance with conventional conceptions of political communication. The recent interventions into the relationship between politics and popular culture that I have touched upon offer a number of important points in this regard, and I would summarize them as follows:

- ◆ In the contemporary media world, popular culture and politics cannot be fully separated. They are discursively structured in many similar ways, and they inform each other, feed off of each other.
- ◆ Both domains mobilize rational as well as affective responses.
- ◆ The blurring and hybridization of program genres further brings them together.
- ◆ Popular culture offers a sense of easy access to symbolic communities, a world of belonging beyond oneself.
- ◆ This can at times be seen as preparatory for civic engagement, prefiguring involvement beyond one’s own private domain, by offering ‘cultural citizenship’ in the media world.
- ◆ As a further step, popular culture invites us to engage - with both our hearts and minds - in many questions having to do with how we should live (and how we should live together), what kind of society we want. It allows us to process, to work through positions having to do with conflicting values, norms, and identities in a turbulent late modern socio-cultural milieu.
- ◆ Moreover, many of the themes taken up by popular culture may seem more important and more personally relevant than the agendas on offer from mainstream politics.

- ◆ Finally, popular culture can serve to foster alternative conceptions of what actually constitutes politics and the political, generating reflections and engagement over other kinds of concerns and issues.


Democracy: expansions, not contractions

Taken together, these points strongly accentuate the porous character of the boundary, and offer us insights into how television and other forms of popular culture can play a role in civic engagement. Can we, should we, go further than this in our understanding of the relationship between them? No doubt we can and will go further as both our sense of the 'political' and media logics continue to evolve. However, here it can be useful to keep in mind a few distinctions.

The perspective on television and popular culture that I have been sketching suggests that the field of democracy is in the process of addition, not subtraction. That is to say, in our expanding notion of the political - the inclusion of more personally relevant political questions, identity issues, the single issue groups with their respective agendas, the various kinds of alternative or life politics, etc. - we are basically *adding* to the realm of what is potentially political. And that is a crucial development. However, while many citizens understandably find conventional party politics uninviting, many of the key issues addressed in that context are decidedly not trivial. They have to do with such things as how taxes are set, how public funding is spent, i.e. how wealth is distributed in society. Such politics concern a whole range of questions, large and small, local, national, and global, that profoundly affect the life circumstances of people.

These questions must not disappear from the public sphere - though democracy would often certainly benefit if they were framed differently. These kinds of issues can be - and certainly have been - defined and added to the formal political agenda via extra-parliamentarian contexts, which is also an important development. Yet, what is at stake here is not the particular site of politics, but the continual importance of certain categories of issues: they may not always be subjectively engaging (or 'interesting'), but they remain objectively significant (i.e. 'important').

Likewise, the forms of political communication are also expanding and evolving. While it would be conceptually confusing to a priori label most popular culture as 'political communication', in the light of the discussion above we should at least acknowledge its potentially political relevance, recognizing its 'proto-political' character for stimulating civic talk. Yet, as we move into the newer forms of factual television, in particular where the traditional conventions of documentary have become loosened, can we simply assume that audiences unproblematically follow along? Have their foundational assumptions about factuality and truth claims simply evolved with the newer




programs? How are their coordinates of social and political reality affected by the hybridization of genres, and how do they perceive such programming?

It is important to maintain sociological contact with real, live citizens and their experiences of the changes going on - to have some grasp of how they perceive, for example, the turbulence within factual television programming. We have some important evidence of this from the comparative studies conducted by Hill (2007) in the UK and Sweden. Focusing on viewer strategies, how they engage with and interpret the various genres, she interviewed viewers to find out how they make their way through the chaotic mix of new and rescrumbled genres, where the fictive and non-fictive have become entwined.

What she finds is a strong tendency for viewers to hold on to established conceptions of an external, objective reality and notions of documentary style truth claims. Viewers are fully aware of the contemporary restyling of factual television and other genre developments; they can identify documentary as an overarching genre and can classify many different versions of documentary as sub-genres. While there is an acceptance of the newer forms of factual television, as well as a tendency to continue to underscore a baseline conception of reality, there is a clear tendency to rank the spectacle of reality entertainment lower than more serious genres (unlike Coleman (2005) who interviewed fans of *Big Brother*, Hill is working with representative viewer samples). For both British and Swedish viewers, the distinction between public issues and popular culture remains a compelling framework for evaluating genres of factual television.

The UK and Sweden are of course societies with a strong public service tradition in television, as Hill emphasizes, and this no doubt impacts on how viewers responded. For example, they tended strongly to rank factual public service programs higher than other kinds. Yet, the results are still of relevance for societies like the US that lack a strong public service tradition. The genre developments in the UK and Sweden, similar, though not identical, have had a disruptive impact on fundamental orientations having to do with representations of knowledge, fairness, and truth claims. This has forced audiences to come to reflect on - and come to terms with - these changes. Thus, for example, 'reality TV', which Hill calls in this context a 'feral genre', has become reclassified in viewers' minds as 'reality entertainment', reminding us of the cultural tenacity of core conceptions having to do with how we orient ourselves towards the 'real world', and the media we use in doing so.

Finally, we can engage in some speculation that the modes of engagement and participation facilitated by popular culture may have significance for future democratic involvement. Mediated popular culture, as found on the internet and on the growing net-based forms of interaction prevalent on television, is contributing to the emergence of new horizons of expectation concerning communicative practices. In chatting and voting on issues around reality



programs, in joining online fan cultures, making use of fanzines, blogging about popular topics, utilizing tools such as Photoshop, portraying oneself online on sites such as MySpace and Facebook, people - especially younger ones - are developing strong patterns of mediated engagement and participation. The perennial question as to where the political resides follows along with these developments, but we can certainly assume that the boundary with popular culture will continue to be permeable. We must conclude that a new, very talkative mediated culture is emerging, with this 'convergence culture', as Jenkins (2006) calls it, enabling many new forms of participation and collaboration. If we recall the kind of 'working through' that broadcast television has facilitated over the past decades, one can only begin to speculate what can be done online in much shorter time frames.

Popular civic cultures?

The public sphere perspective and political communication have both traditionally zeroed in on television journalism; the remaining programming, and popular culture more broadly, has been dismissed as at best irrelevant for concerns about democracy, at worst outright harmful. The above discussion, and the culturalist literature on which it draws, hopefully serve to offer a more nuanced view. I conclude this chapter below with some summary reflections on television as a space for civic culture, looking at five of the six dimensions of civic culture in regard to the links between politics and television (the sixth dimension is 'spaces' - which in our discussion here is simply television itself, as a site of politics and popular culture). As will be apparent, it is not the case that we arrive at many easy closures in these matters.

Knowledge

While conveying detailed information in a cognitive manner has never been television's forte, it does well at evoking discussion on an endless array of themes and topics, thereby contributing to a talkative citizenry. Whether the topics should be seen as political or not can be discussed in each case, but certainly the accessible character of television, as a prominent institution of cultural citizenship, is important in foregrounding political talk. The popularity of the medium is bound up with the pleasures that it offers, even in knowledge acquisition. While there are obvious limits as to what it can reasonably provide in terms of traditional notions of knowledge, Glynn (2000) makes the point that television offers different regimes of knowing, that speak, in different ways, to different groups, in particular those with less social power. It is precisely the 'popularity' of television that makes it so important both as a purveyor of potentially relevant political knowledge and as a space in which viewers are free to select and define what is important to them and what indeed is political.



Values

Television offers a mixed bag in regard to values. Much of programming's concerns with values of course pertain to private life, private solutions, individual choice-making, consumption, and market relations. This reminds us of the hegemonic boundaries of much of television's working through. Yet, television's working through of values central to people's lives over the years would suggest that it can become a space for contestation, often with a proto-political resonance, and thus of significance for civic cultures. Also, television discourses still reiterate many of the basic values and virtues of democracy, such as individual rights and respect for the law. Such values become a baseline for generating scandal, and representations of moral deviation are often amplified through compelling dramaturgy. The portrayals of scandal may well become less convincing when scandal becomes routinized: scepticism and cynicism take root. Yet, if scandal and indignation are one kind of response, laughter is another. Jones (2005), in analyzing the new political comedy programs from a civic cultures perspective, concludes that much of the humour builds on a value-centred way of looking at politics, and is driven by the comic appeals to return to basic democratic values that we all hold in common.

Trust

Television tends to show very few examples - in fiction or non-fiction - of the 'thin trust' that typifies civic social bonds or co-operation that makes a political impact. The social bonds displayed lean toward romance, male bonding such as sports or action/military, social friendships, etc. (a large-scale content analysis of this theme might yield interesting results). The best we might say on this score links up with the cultural citizenship perspective: that television, as a major outlet for popular culture, includes a number of genres that accentuate and celebrate a sense of 'democratic we-ness', a positive horizontal social view. Over the years, television's continual processes of making visible a wider and wider array of social sectors, lifestyles, and generally unconventional personalities may be more significant than normally recognized: one might well hypothesise that the medium does an important job in both factual and fictive programming of rendering familiar particular elements of society that many people would otherwise never encounter.

However, television is also known to promote fear and suspicion in some audience groups via its emphasis on crime, linking danger with public space and thereby contributing to the uncivic retreat into the private domain. In this case, fear derives from those defined as located below this democratic we-ness. On the other hand, the fact that established politics and politicians - as well as corporate leaders - tend to have low trust suggests that threats come also from social locations above this we-ness, and also returns us to the fundamental issues of contemporary civic disengagement and mainstream media's role in this regard.



Practices

One of the key practices of civic culture is discussion, a cornerstone of the public sphere perspective and civic republicanism. Different kinds of programming situate the viewing subject differently; in some cases viewers are very much invited to respond actively, take positions, even argue, as we see in some talk shows and reality TV programs. Other programming leans more towards positioning the viewer as a non-dialogic receiver of information from on high (e.g. traditional news programs). What real viewers actually do is of course an empirical question. Some viewers will be left speechless by a sensationalist talk show, while others will be provoked into an argumentative response by a serious documentary.

In the American context, Lembo (2000) identifies a typology of television use: 'discrete' use is selective and focused; viewing has a cohesion and coherence in relation to people's social location and to their sense of accomplishment. 'Undirected' and 'continuous' use are diffuse, less the product of conscious decision. Moreover, Lembo links discrete use with a solid, modernist sense of self-formation; it is action- and productivity-oriented, and correlates with higher social power. Undirected and continuous use has less consistency and coherence; the viewing is characterised by more context-free involvement with imagery where normative frameworks are weak. This type of engagement with television's image world generates disjuncture, where fleeting meanings do not cumulatively add up to much. The flows, eruptions and interruptions of the viewing experience situate viewers squarely in the domain of corporate commodity culture, according to Lembo.

Even if this analysis is in part a replay of the differences in class-based cultural capital, it suggestively invites attention to the issue of watching as a practice that relates to individual autonomy, personal development, and empowerment. Set in relation to civic culture, we might say that the issue is not between watching television or not, but rather where the locus of control and definitional power lie - i.e. who's in charge, so to speak. We could conclude from Lembo's study that the way we relate to television in our everyday lives correlates with the civic horizons we may develop and the sense of empowerment we may experience.

Beyond the engagement element in the viewing experience, we should reiterate the theme of weak public connections to political practice emphasized by Couldry, Livingstone and Markham (2007): that exposure to mainstream news mostly does not lead to political participation, because of the perceived limited access afforded by the political system itself. Together with the findings of Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2005) that stress the lack of enabling images of citizens on television news, we must keep in mind that the immediate civic practices and the sense of empowerment to be derived from television news as such are limited.



Identities

Traditionally, it has been said that the mass media are weak in fostering identities of citizenship among their audiences. Where do we find the sense of civic ‘we-ness’ in contemporary television? As we move from the journalism of high modernity to the late modern realms of subjective experience, it becomes quite thin. Increasingly, television and the rest of the media milieu position us as consumers: it is in the domain of consumption where we are to be empowered, where we make choices, where we create ourselves. To be sure, being a citizen and a consumer are not always antithetical: citizens need to consume, and consumption at times can be politically framed. Yet there is a fundamental distinction between consumption, which is predicated on the fluctuations of the market, and the principles of universality embedded in the notion of the citizen.

However, this perspective is being modified by arguments from another angle, that television, as a major institution of popular culture, offers us opportunities to fantasize, and speculate about ourselves, our lives, our identities. Moreover, taking our cue from the literature on identity in late modernity, it may be that it is more productive to see how elements of civic identities infuse other domains of our selves, how the political can enter into many areas of our lives, rather than to conceptualize a bounded ‘civic identity module’ that we activate in limited, yet already explicitly delineated political contexts. Certainly popular culture offers us resources for exploring the political links between public and private spheres, and thus extending and multiplying our civic identities.


Television’s contribution to civic cultures remains equivocal, though the picture becomes more optimistic as we shift our perspective towards the online linkages of the newer television environment. It may be that mainstream television offers largely shrivelled, voting-oriented versions of civic identities. On the other hand, it provides a continuous flood of topics that touch people in various ways. Some of these topics can, especially if processed through discussion, resonate with core values, suggest practices, mobilize identities, and generate engagement in the public sphere. They can evoke contestation, and further develop the terrain of the political, thereby pumping blood into the body of democracy. Or not: we can no doubt just as easily find evidence for negative spirals. The point is not that we should try to arrive at some ultimate, once-and-for-all evaluation, but rather, to be alert to how television - despite all its familiar limitations - may at times help move us beyond narrow definitions of politics and the public sphere, and connect to civic cultures in subtle, surprising, and unintended ways.

Note: I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for some very helpful criticism.



References

- Baudrillard, J., 1995. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor (MI): University of Michigan Press.
- Coleman, S., 2005. The lonely citizen: Indirect representation in an age of networks. *Political Communication*, 22(2), 197-214.
- Coleman, S., 2006. How the other half votes: Big Brother viewers and the 2005 British General Election Campaign. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(4), 457-479.
- Coleman, S., 2007a. From big brother to Big Brother: Two faces of interactive engagement. In: P. Dahlgren, ed. *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning for Democratic Participation*. New York: Routledge, 21-39.
- Coleman, S., 2007b. How democracies have disengaged from young people. In: B., Loader, ed. *Young Citizens in the Digital Age: Political Engagement, Young People and New Media*. London: Routledge, 166-185.
- Couldry, N.; Livingstone, S. & Markham, T., 2007. *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*. Basingstoke: Intellect.
- Dahlgren, P., 1995. *Television and the Public Sphere*. London: Sage.
- Dahlgren, P., 2009. *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Democracy and Communication*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- De Bord, G., 2006[1967]. *Society of the Spectacle*. Oakland (CA): AK Press.
- Ellis, J., 2000. *Seeing Things: Television in the Age of Uncertainty*. London: I. B. Tauris Publishers.
- Fiske, J., 1988. *Television Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Fiske, J. & John H., 1978. *Reading Television*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Glynn, K., 2000. *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television*. Durham (NC): Duke University Press.
- Gray, J., 2007. The news: You gotta love it. In: J. Gray, C. Sandross and C. L. Harrington, eds. *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*. New York: New York University Press.
- Hermes, J., 2005. *Re-reading Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Hill, A., 2007. *Restyling Factual Television: News, Documentary and Reality Television*. London: Routledge.
- Jenkins, H., 2006. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.

- 
- Jones, J., 2005. *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*. London: Sage.
- Lembo, R., 2000. *Thinking through Television*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, J.; Inthorn, S., & Wahl-Jorgensen, K., 2005. *Consumers or Citizens? What the Media Tell Us About Political Participation*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Lunt, P. & Stenner, P., 2005. The Jerry Springer Show as an emotional public sphere. *Media, Culture and Society*, 27(1), 59-81.
- Newcomb, H. & Hirsch, P. M., 2000[1984]. Television as a cultural forum. In: H. Newcomb, ed. *Television: The Critical View*. 6th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 561-573.
- Scheuer, J., 2001. *The Sound Bite Society*. London: Routledge.
- Simons, J., 2003. Popular culture and mediated politics: Intellectuals, elites and democracy. In: J. Corner & D. Pels, eds. *Media and the Restyling of Politics*. London: Sage, 171-189.
- Street, J., 1997. *Politics and Popular Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- van Zoonen, L., 2005. *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*. Lanham (MD): Rowman & Littlefield.

Downloaded from EastBound / 2010
<http://eastbound.eu/2010/dahlgren>