



young and
MEDIATED

In search of the Holy Grail

YOUTH MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CITIZENSHIP

Rather than support the democratic process, as in the ideal scheme of things it should be doing, journalism has become an alienating, cynicism-inducing, narcoticising force in our political culture, turning people off citizenship rather than equipping them to fulfil their democratic potential.

By Lynette Steenveld

This is McNair's (2000: 8) rather harsh view of journalism, but Buckingham (1997) also argues that instead of blaming young people for turning away from the news media, we should rather re-consider the relationship between the news media and young people, in particular, and citizenship in general.

Youth have been constructed and addressed in contradictory ways in the media: as victims of adult society in need of protection; as a 'dangerous' alienated group threatening to adult society; or, mid-way between these two, as 'incomplete' adults/citizens and therefore in need of guidance (Kurth-Schai 1988: 114-115; Finn and Checkoway 1998: 335). As a result, youth are confronted with "confusing and contradictory patterns of protection and pressure, with conflicting perceptions of their abilities and inadequacies, rendering their social presence inconsequential and their social power invisible" (Kurth-Schai 1988: 116).

And yet the media are seen by liberals and radicals alike as an important site for public discussion and dissent, what is often deemed the basis of democratic citizenship (Golding and Murdock 2000; Dahlgren 2000). In particular, the purpose of journalism, write Glasser and Craft, is "to promote and indeed improve, and not merely to report on or complain about, public or civic life" (1998: 2004). Based on Marshall's (1964)

view of citizenship, the rationale is that the media serves citizens by making them aware of their rights so that they can exercise them. The media's role in a democracy is thus to provide citizens with the access to the information and debates they need to make informed political decisions; and to provide the means through which citizens "recognize themselves and their aspirations in the range of representations" (Murdock and Golding 1989: 183), which confirm and construct their personhood, and their identity as citizens (Gitlin 1998: 168; Ronning 1994: 15).

This kind of theorising begs questions about how 'youth' are to be regarded vis-à-vis citizenship and, more particularly, how the media can play this integrative, democratic role vis-à-vis young people. A key question is, therefore: How are we to think about the relationship between youth media consumption and citizenship?

Citizenship

Marshall's hegemonic view of citizenship is that it is the condition of one's membership of a polity. He identifies three main dimensions which constitute citizenship as a particular social identity, with their associated rights and the institutional means for securing them: the political, civil, social and cultural (Murdock and Golding 1989: 181; Dahlgren 2000: 317). In this way, citizenship is a means of establishing equality in a structurally inequalitarian state. The significance of South Africa's 1994 elections is that it enabled all South Africans to be constituted as citizens.

However, a more recent view of citizenship is that it should no longer be seen as a state of being, but one of 'becoming': that one can *learn* to become a citizen (Delanty 2007). There is thus a move away from a state-centred view of citizenship, to a 'people-centred' one (see Hartley 2010: 234). This view shifts the focus from membership of a polity, to "common experiences, cognitive processes, forms of cultural translation and discourses of empowerment" (Delanty

Citizenship is thus not just about rights and responsibilities, but about capacity for action, the learning about the self, and the relationship of the self to the other.

2007), which can take place in the informal context of everyday life, and is influenced by the critical and formative events in people's lives. Citizenship is thus not just about rights and responsibilities, but about capacity for action, the learning about the self, and the relationship of the self to the other.

This is perhaps a more useful way of thinking about youth as citizens. Hart, for example, uses the term "cultural citizenship" which foregrounds broader aspects of youth social identities; recognises differences between young people (class, race, cultural backgrounds etc.); and argues that equality of citizenship can only be attained by getting youth views of, and participation in, the polity to be constructed (Hart 2009: 243-245). In other words, youth should not be seen as merely fitting in, or providing a rubber stamp for a normalised state, but rather that their participation should help to constitute the very nature of the state.

Another concept related to citizenship is civic engagement. Many argue that it can be seen as a form of social capital, and thus a critical resource for positive social, emotional, and intellectual development (Winter 2003), and thus a pre-requisite component of democratic practice (Galston 2003; Flanagan and Levine 2010; Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner and Lerner 2010).

Public sphere: Nexus of media/youth engagement

The basis of the news/civic engagement/democratic practice argument is the Habermasian argument that the media constitute a public sphere for rational-critical debate through which "strangers" can constitute public opinion and public consensus. But the alternative views of citizenship noted above speak to post-modernist and constructivist critiques that the Habermasian public sphere neglects issues such as gender, class and age (Fraser 1990); sidelines the role of alternative media (see Schudson 1997; Buckingham 1997; Gitlin 1998); ignores the existence of "counter-public spheres" and multiple public spheres (sphericules) (Gitlin 1998); and disregards "dis-sensus" and the agency of audiences. Equally important is the critique of Habermas' assumption that the public sphere fosters rational deliberation, thereby also ignoring Bakhtinian notions of dissimilarity, dialogical engagement, carnival and spectacle (Gardiner 2004: 30).

Youth reception of media

The re-thinking about the kinds of spaces and the modes of deliberation that the media offer, as noted above, provide important perspectives on the youth/media nexus. Youth researchers offer another dimension. They argue that adolescents' views are *mediated* by their relationships with peers and parents, and thus it is not just youth media consumption that is important, but *whether* and *how* they discuss the ideas they get from the media with their peers and family. They argue for the critical importance of "*communication competence*" (Shah, McLeod and Lee 2009; McLeod, Shah, Hess and Lee 2010) "which includes media use (with focus on public

affairs news consumption) and interpersonal communication (discussion of public affairs and politics with others), as underpinning civic competence” (Boyd et al 2011: 1169). These communicative abilities are therefore described by civic scholars as an “important aspect of civic development and critical for effective civic participation” (Boyd et al 2011: 1169).

Youth, media and citizenship

All these ideas arguably give us clues to how the media can help in the constitution of youth citizenship. Modernist approaches to citizenship focus on the structural relationship between citizen and state, suggesting a privileging of information (hard news), and a particular form of critical engagement, namely rational critical debate. Eschewing the hard news/soft news divide enables experimenting with form/content in order to *reach* young people (see Buckingham 1997; Costera Meijer 2006; Baum 2003). However, it does not negate the value of information (Patterson 2000: 4), and is consistent with arguments about convergence culture which points to the complex ways in which content flows between different media and genres in the new media environment, thus offering opportunities for youth consumers to become producers of meaning, with an attendant shift in their identities (Jenkins 2006).

In contrast, post-modern, constructivist approaches focus on citizenship as a complex identity – not the binary citizen-or-consumer (Hartley 2010: 238) which exists in relation to other identities. This view points to the potential importance of *all media* (news and entertainment), in the *constitution* of this identity. Critiques of the Habermasian public sphere also point to the social importance of alternative spheres, alternative media forms, alternative modes of address and ways of communicating with a range of publics, who are often politically and culturally marginalised (Atton 2002: 4; Dockney et al 2010: 77).



Yasser Booley/Africa Media Online

They challenge the privileging of hard news and information, and even the producer-consumer polarity, pointing to the significance of popular cultural forms (rise of social media) and the technologically enabled collapse of the binary producer-consumer into “produsers” (producers + consumers) (Bruns 2007). This approach echoes James C. Scott’s (1990) theorisation of everyday forms of resistance and Gluckman’s (1954) rituals of rebellion, which point to the hidden discourses of youth which potentially go on “offstage”, making them difficult for the power elites to decode. This is a useful way of thinking about youth protest as it departs from the narrow definition of resistance (and related identities) as referring to physical and material protests in the streets, to include sets of practices used by the dominated to challenge those who attempt to dominate them (Willems 2010: 4).

For the connected, new media technologies enable individuals to self-represent, self-organise, and construct for themselves what the associational relations among strangers will be, thereby offering the possibility for re-shaping/re-configuring social relationships, and thus the public sphere (kinds of debates, nature of debates). New media thus offers the possibility for combining the personal/lived with the social/political that some argue the revitalisation of youth engagement in/with politics requires (Hartley 2010: 245; Buckingham 1997). But the digital divide is real for us in the South. From a recent South African baseline survey of youth, media and citizenship (Sanpad 2013), it appears that most youth still favour the legacy media as their main source of news; they also trust these media more as sources of information. But they also think that the media would serve them better by dealing with issues that help them understand their world. This seems to be a fundamental requirement of all media if they wish to fulfil their democratic role of contributing to the constitution of the social identity we call citizenship.

References

- Atton, C. 2002. *Alternative Media*. London: Sage
- Baum, M. 2003. Sex, lies and war: how soft news brings foreign policy to the inattentive public. *American political science review*. 96.1: 91-109.
- Boyd, MJ, Zaff, JF, Phelps E, Weiner MB, Lerner RM. 2011. The relationship between adolescents’ news media use and civic engagement: the indirect effect of interpersonal communication with parents. *Journal of Adolescents*. 34: 1167-1179.
- Bruns, Axel (2007). *Creativity and Cognition: Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI conference on Creativity & cognition*, ACM, Washington, DC: 99.

- Buckingham, D.** 1997. News media, political socialization and popular citizenship: Towards a new agenda. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*. 14: 344-366.
- Costera Meijer, I.** 2006. *De Toekomst van het Nieuws*. Amsterdam: Otto Cramwinckel.
- Dahlgren, P.** 2000. Media, Citizenship and Civic Culture. In Curran, J and Gurevitch, M (eds.) *Mass Media and Society*. London: Arnold.
- Delanty, Gerard.** 2007. Citizenship as a Learning Process: Disciplinary Citizenship versus Cultural Citizenship. *Eurozine* 30 June. <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-06-30-delanty-en.html> accessed 3 October 2011.
- Dockney, J, Tomaselli, K.G, and Hart, T.B.** 2010. Cellphilms, mobile platforms and prodsumers: Hyper-individuality and Film. In: Hyde-Clarke, N (Ed) *The Citizen in communication: Revisiting traditional, new and community media practices in South Africa*. Cape Town: Juta Press.
- Finn, J.L and Checkoway, B.** 1998. Young People as Competent Community Builders: Challenge to Social Work. *Social Work*. 43, 4: 335-345.
- Flanagan, C. and Levine, P.** 2010. Civic engagement and the transition to Adulthood. *The future of Children [online]*, 20 (1): 159-179. Available at: www.futureofchildren.org [Accessed July 2012].
- Fraser, N.** 1990. Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. *Social Text*, 25/26: 56-80.
- Galston, W.** 2003. Civic education and political participation. *Phi Delta Kappan [online]*, 85 (1): 29-33. Available at: <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/kappan.htm> [Accessed July 2012].
- Gardiner, M.** 2004. Wild publics and grotesque symposiums: Habermas and Bakhtin in dialogue, everyday life and the public sphere. In N. Crossley and J. M. Roberts. *After Habermas. New perspectives on the public sphere*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing/The Sociological Review.
- Gitlin, T.** 1998. Public Sphere or Public Sphericules? In Liebes, T and Curran, J. (eds.) *Media, Ritual and Identity*, London: Routledge.
- Glasser, T and Craft, S.** (1998) Public Journalism in the Search for Democratic Ideals. In: Liebes, T and Curran, J. (eds.) *Media, Ritual and Identity*, London: Routledge.
- Gluckman, M.** 1954. *Rituals of Rebellion in South East Africa*. (The Frazer Lecture, 1952). Manchester University Press.
- Golding, P and Murdock, G.** 2000. Culture, Communications and Political Economy. In: Curran, J and Gurevitch, M (eds.) *Mass Media and Society*, London: Arnold.
- Hart, S.** 2009. The 'problem' with youth: young people, citizenship and the community. *Citizenship Studies*. 13(6): 641-657.
- Hartley, J.** 2010. *The Uses of Digital Literacy*. Queensland: University of Queensland Press.
- Jenkins, H.** (2006) *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press.
- Kurth-Schai, R.** 1988. The Roles of Youth in Society: A Reconceptualisation. *The Educational Forum*. 52 (2): 114-132.
- McCleod, J M, Shah, D V, Hess, D and Lee N-J.** 2010. Education and Communication: Creating Communication Competence for Socialization into Public Life. In: Sherrod, L R, Flanagan, C and Torney-Purta, J (eds.). *Handbook of research on Civic Engagement in Youth*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McNair, B.** 2000. Journalism and Democracy. The Debate. In: *Journalism and Democracy. An Evaluation of the Political Public Sphere*. London: Routledge (1-13).
- Murdock, G.** 1999. Rights and Representations. Public Discourse and Cultural Citizenship. In: Gripsrud, J. (ed.) *Television and Common Knowledge*, London: Routledge.
- Murdock, G and Golding, P.** 1989. Information Poverty and Political Inequality: Citizenship in the Age of Privatised Communications. *Journal of Communication*, 39(3): 180-195.
- Patterson, T.E.** 2000. Doing well and doing good: How soft news and critical journalism are shrinking the new audience and weakening democracy—And what news outlets can do about it. (Faculty Research Working Paper Series, RWPO1-OO1). Cambridge, MA: John F Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
- Ronning, H.** 1994. *Media and Democracy. Theories and Principles with Reference to an African Context*, Harare: Sapes.
- Sanpad.** 2013. *A baseline study of youth identity, the media and the public sphere in South Africa*. School of Journalism & Media Studies, Rhodes University.
- Schudson, M.** 1997. Why Conversation is Not the Soul of Democracy. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 14: 297-309.
- Scott, James C.** 1990. *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Shah, DV, McLeod, JM and Lee N-J.** 2009. Communication Competence as a Foundation for Civic Competence: Process of Socialization into Citizenship. *Political Communication*. 26 (1): 102-117.
- Willems, W.** 2010. Beyond Dramatic Revolutions and grand rebellions: Everyday forms of resistance in the Zimbabwean crisis. *Communicare*, Vol. 29 Special Edition: 1-15.
- Winter, N.** 2003. *Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Positive Youth Development Outcomes*. Prepared for The Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. Washington: Policy Studies Associates, INC.
- Zaff, J, Boyd, M, Li, Y, Lerner, J. and Lerner, R.** 2010. Active and engaged citizenship: Multi-group and Longitudinal Factorial Analysis of an Integrated Construct of Civic Engagement. *Journal on Youth Adolescence [online]*, 39: 736-750. Available at: http://www.national4-hheadquarters.gov/library/PYD-JYA_Zaff.pdf. [Accessed: July 2012].



Lynette Steenveld is an associate professor in the School of Journalism & Media Studies at Rhodes University. Her main areas of research include the media's construction of identity and its potential contribution to citizenship. She is currently the Chair of the Board of Grocott's Mail, South Africa's oldest independent newspaper. L.steenveld@ru.ac.za