At any given historical juncture, the present often appears ambivalent. One finds contradictory processes at work, with any resolution or transition to a different set of circumstances seemingly quite unclear. Unquestionably the present state of democracy gives rise to such uncertainty. In the past decade or so, the catalogue of ills facing liberal democracies has become global common sense, with national variations that seemingly just confirm the general patterns. The formal systems seem stagnant and unresponsive, and citizens are ‘dropping out’, as manifested in declines in voting, party memberships, and in some places a marked growth in civic cynicism. Even civil society is not faring well, with patterns of disengagement continuing even on this front, as Putnam (2000) in particular has noted. At the same time, though, there have been other developments which give rise to some guarded optimism: there appears to be a growth in extra-parliamentarian political engagement, newer forms of involvement among Social movements, activist groups, exponents of ‘new’, ‘single issue’, or ‘lifestyle’ politics, as well as a variety of citizen campaigns and global opinion-building efforts. To what extent these alternatives should be seen as ‘balancing out’ the negative trends is still a very open question.

For democracy there are thus good reasons to be worried, as well as to keep hold of hope. Seen from the standpoint of citizen engagement, the media’s role readily occupies the spotlight: there have been many analyses arguing that media culture generally, with its emphasis on consumption and entertainment, has undercut the kind of public culture needed for a healthy democracy. More specifically, contemporary journalism is often charged with subverting democracy in its political coverage, via its growing commercialisation, sensationalism, trivialisation, personality fixation, horse-race mentality and so on. The charge is often two-fold: on the one hand journalism (and media culture more generally) contributes to an informational dumbing-down of the citizenry, on the other hand it promotes cynicism towards the political system and its representatives, as well as a congruent sense of
powerlessness. (Contributions to this large literature have been coming both from academic corners, for example, Franklin (1997); Street (2001) and from media professionals (for example, Fallows (1997)). The more optimistic, upbeat interpretation of the media's role often arises when attention is shifted to the Internet and related new digital media. In these contexts the emphasis is on the newer forms of political engagement, rather than on traditional electoral politics (for example, Bennett, 1998; Bennett forthcoming; Castells 1996, 1997, 1998).

In this chapter I will not be arguing for optimism or pessimism in regard to democracy. What I wish to do instead is present an analytic framework that I have been trying to develop (cf. Dahlgren, 2000) relating citizens' political involvement and their uses of media - both the traditional mass-media and the newer information and communication technology - to the concept of civic culture. It is my sense that the theme of political engagement/disengagement and the relevance of the media in this regard would benefit from a perspective that understands citizens' participation in terms of meaningful action and the cultural prerequisites for such action.

The idea of civic culture takes as its starting point the notion of citizens as social agents, and it asks what are the cultural factors that can impinge on the actions and communication of people in their roles as (multifarious) citizens. Civic culture, as I discuss below, is anchored in the practices and symbolic milieu of everyday life, or, if one prefers, of civil society. One of the assumptions here is that for a functioning democracy, there are certain conditions that reside at the level of lived experiences, resources and subjective dispositions that need to be met. The notion of civic culture grafts some fruitful elements from cultural theory onto some more familiar themes from political communication. The point of this modest 'cultural turn' is not just to highlight that such dimensions as meaning, identity and subjectivity are important elements of political communication, but also to specify empirical entry points into the study of citizens' media use that can help us to understand various modes and intensities of engagement. These dimensions, in dynamic interaction with each other, can be studied to examine how at any given point in time they might serve to promote or to hinder engagement.

In what follows, I first present a short overview of the civic culture framework, and then model it as a circuit comprised of six dimensions - each of these being a door to empirical inquiry. The actual interplay between these dimensions configures the character of civic culture at any point in time and in any specific social location. With each dimension I try to suggest some possible media articulations. From there I summarise some of the major changes in the media landscape and their relation to democracy. I end with some snapshots from the realm of the Internet, which point to reconfigurations of civic culture within the dynamics of (as yet) marginalised progressive-political engagement.

Civic Culture: Towards an Analytic Frame

The search for explanations as to why many people, especially among the young, are withdrawing from the democratic political process, or simply not entering it, and thereby indirectly renouncing their roles as citizens, can go in a variety of directions. Likewise, the challenge to clarifying why in fact people may become engaged in politics - and may even develop new forms of engagement - can be met in various ways. It is my sense that we might be able to understand some of the dynamics of engagement/disengagement by going via the concept of culture. The frame of civic culture is not an ambitious 'theory'; it does not anticipate being able to offer full explanations about citizens' democratic participation or lack of it. Hopefully, however, it can enhance our understanding of human action and meaning-making in concrete settings.

Cultures consist of patterns of communication, practices and meaning; they provide taken for granted orientations - factual and normative - as well as other resources for collective life. They are internalised, intersubjectively: they exist 'in our heads', as it were, guiding and informing action, speech and understanding. If we were to say that culture only exists at the moment of speech or action, we would lapse into a behaviourist view. Similarly, if we argued that culture rigidly steers all speech and action, we stumble into determinism. Culture thus must be treated as providing road markers for likely patterns of doing and thinking, but never directing automatically. There is thus always a dimension of potentiality in cultural analysis - possibilities that we analytically assert exist, but that we can never assume always to be actualised.

The notion of civic culture links up with notions of 'strong' or 'radical' democracy, participatory and 'deliberative' democracy, as well as a view of citizenship that is associated with neo-republicanism (cf. Barber, 1984; Beiner, 1995; Benhabib, 1996; Bohman and Regh, 1997; Elster, 1998; Eschele, 2001; van Gunsteren, 1998; Mouffe, 1992). I will touch more upon these themes below. It thus has a normative base: civic culture is not just a 'good thing', but a necessary one for democracy. Given that the foundation of the civic culture frame is the citizen - agent, this frame is thus interested in the processes of becoming - how people develop into citizens, how they come to see themselves as members and potential participants in societal development. Liberal theory, for example, tends too often to postulate a mature citizen who enters into the public realm, fully formed, as it were. The question of how s/he gets there is largely ignored, or at best is seen as something to be understood in terms of individual psychology.

Civic culture as a concept is not new and my reformulation carries over some traditional elements from political science/political communication. American political scientists in the Cold War era tried to map democracy's
cultural variables using large-scale survey techniques together with functionalist views on social integration (Almond and Verba, 1963; 1980). My point of departure is somewhat different; in using the concept, I wish to update it and avoid what I take to be elements of psychological reductionism and ethnocentrism. Also, my view of culture is constructionist and materialist, rather than systemic; it is the connection with contemporary cultural theory that enhances the utility of the civic culture concept. If the more familiar concept of the public sphere points to the politically relevant communicative spaces in daily life and in the media, civic culture points to those features of the socio-cultural world – dispositions, practices, processes – that constitute pre-conditions for people’s actual participation in the public sphere, in civil and political society. In short, these preconditions involve cultural attributes prevalent among citizens that can in various ways facilitate democratic life. This view of civic culture has obvious parallels with the work of Robert Putnam (2000), though he does not make explicit use of the term. In his political sociology, ‘social capital’ is the core concept (see below).

The notion of civic culture that I employ is anchored in everyday life and its horizons, and can thus be seen as an important region of the Habermasian lifeworld, with its negotiation of norms and values (see Habermas’ more recent formulations of civil society and the public sphere: Habermas, 1996, esp. Chapter 8). Extending this line of thinking, civic culture, as a part of the lifeworld, is vulnerable to colonisation from the system of politics and economics. Civic culture, in other words, is shaped by an array of factors. Even the legal system is of utmost importance here: constitutionalism is essential, with functioning institutions that can guarantee among other things the rule of law, democratic decision-making, the separation of powers, individual rights of expression, assembly, association, religion, etc., fair and recurring elections and accessible and alternative sources of information. Also, factors of social structure, economics, education, organisational possibilities, infrastructure, spatiality, can all have their impact. For our purposes here, however, we turn our attention to the media factors in shaping civic culture, whose true significance is still only emerging.

Civic culture can, nevertheless, prevail even in the absence of many of these important social, political and legal factors, as we saw in several countries when the Communist system began to collapse. A civic culture is thus potentially both strong and vulnerable: it helps to promote the functioning democracy, yet it sits precariously in the face of political and economic power. It can shape citizens, via various ‘technologies of citizenship’, as Cruickshank (1999) calls them, such as education – and I would emphatically add the media – that can serve to empower or disempower.

There is a conceptual and empirical tension between the notions of ‘civic’ and ‘political’. Without going into an etymological digression, we can note that ‘civic’ pertains to citizen, as does the related word ‘civil’ when used for example in ‘civil society’. Citizenship points to formal membership and the right as well as the capacity to participate in the development of society. It also has subjective dimensions, discussed below. ‘Civic’ should thus be understood as a prerequisite for the (democratically) political, a reservoir of the pre- or non-political potentiality that becomes actualised at particular moments when politics arises.

This tension is replayed in the coupled ‘civil and political society’; the boundary is difficult to specify with certainty and may indeed be as much temporal as social or spatial. Usually we think of civil society as the broad arena of social interaction, associations and organisations bounded by ‘the state’ on the one side and ‘the market’ on the other. The major empirical problems of these boundaries aside, contemporary thinking about civil society often underscores the socialisation and acculturation to democracy that civil society promotes, a key argument in Putnam (2000). But just where and how does the ‘civic’ or the civic’ become ‘political’, and what is the relationship between ‘the political’ and ‘politics’?

Here I would refer to what was said above about culture as a potential: civic culture is an analytic construct that seeks to identify the possibilities of people acting in the role of citizens. This is a role which can have non- or pre-political aspects (as often is the case in civil society), but which may open up toward ‘the political’, and indeed evolve into formalised politics. The key here is to underscore the processual and contextual dimension: the political and politics are not simply given, but are constructed via word and deed. Mouffe (1999: 754) highlights the distinction between politics and the political:

> By ‘the political’ I refer to the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human society, antagonism that can take many forms and can emerge in diverse social relations. ‘Politics’, on the other hand, refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organise human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’.

Thinking of civic culture as a resource, a storehouse of assets that individuals and groups draw upon and make use of in their activities as citizens, calls to mind the notion of ‘social capital’. Edwards and Foley indicate in their introduction to a collection analysing Robert Putnam’s ideas about civil society and social capital (Edwards et al., 2001), that the latter term has a number of origins and uses. The work of Bourdieu and the American sociologist James Coleman are among the most prominent in this regard, yet it is in Putnam’s work where the term becomes most directly relevant to the theme of democracy. Here social capital is viewed as residing in social connections within networks of reciprocal relations (Putnam, 2000: 21–4). These social ties involve shared values, trust, reciprocity; they are both an individual and a social good. Putnam’s notion of social capital encompasses bonding (exclusive, intra-group ties) and bridging (inclusive, linking up with other groups). He points out that social capital can obviously have a dark side: bomb-planting terrorist groups, racist organisations and so on also have manifest social capital, but in profoundly anti-democratic ways.
These conceptualisations of social capital underscore its character as a resource, but the term as such does not lend itself to analysis of the processes of meaning-making. We need to go beyond the social variables and dynamics and make a cultural turn. The following section attempts do this by presenting civic culture as a circuit with six dimensions.

A dynamic circuit

The civic culture concept does not presuppose homogeneity among its citizens, but in the spirit of neo-republicanism it does suggest the need for minimal shared commitments to the vision and procedures of democracy, which in turn entails a capacity to see beyond the immediate interests of one's own group. Needless to say, this is a challenging balance to maintain. However, different social and cultural groups can express civic culture in different ways, theoretically enhancing democracy's possibilities. Groups and their political positions are always to some extent in flux, and individuals can embody multiple group loyalties.

Conceptually, civic culture can be modelled as an integrated circuit, the six dimensions of which have a mutual reciprocity. Briefly, the six dimensions, discussed below, are: values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion. Together, my aim in deploying them is to underscore a constructionist perspective and highlight the processes of meaning that characterise civic culture at any given point in time.

Values

It should be underscored that values must have their anchorings in everyday life; a political system will never achieve a democratic character if the world of the everyday reflects anti-democratic normative dispositions. We can distinguish between substantive values such as equality, liberty, justice, solidarity and procedural ones, like openness, reciprocity, discussion, responsibility/accountability, tolerance. Even support for the legal system (assuming it is legitimate) is an expression of such virtue: democracy will not survive a situation of widespread lawlessness. However, just how such values are to be applied in practice, can of course be the grounds for serious dispute – and at times should be. This is precisely why the procedural norms and mechanisms take on extra importance. Resolution of conflict, striving for compromise in situations where consensus is impossible, is a key task for a democratic society and requires a commitment to the rules of the game.

The mass media largely tend to reinforce the commitment to democratic values (even by invoking them in sensationalist scandals), and it can be argued that support for the democratic rights of individuals is something that is spreading globally via media representations. Schudson (1998) in his historical survey of citizenship in the US argues that the cementing of the values of individual rights particularly offers grounds for a qualified optimism regarding democracy's future. In regard to the new interactive media, it can be argued that the virtues of democratic communication – the circulation of information, horizontal and vertical contact, deliberation, etc. – have greater potential, even if that is not always achieved in practice.

Affinity

I have in mind here something less ambitious than 'community' – rather, a minimal sense of commonality among citizens in heterogeneous late modern societies, a sense that they belong to the same social and political entities, despite all other differences. They have to deal with each other to make their common entities work, whether at the level of neighbourhood, nation state or the global arena. If there exists a nominal degree of affinity, for example, conflicts can then become enacted between 'adversaries' rather than 'enemies', as Mouffe (1999) puts it, since an awareness of a shared civic commonality is operative. This commonality is grounded in a realisation among all groups of the mutual need to maintain democracy and adhere to its rules. Community of the more compelling kind, with pronounced affect, may (at best) also exist, but I am here deliberately avoiding a strong communitarian argument as a foundation for democratic society, as I think this simply puts the threshold at unnecessarily high a level.

Civic affinity blurs into civic trust. Here too I aim for a modest level. Certainly a degree of trust in government and other major institutions is important, but in the civic context we must also add trust between citizens. Putnam (2000: 136) distinguishes between 'thick' trust based on established personal relationships, and 'thin trust', the generalised honesty and expectations of reciprocity that we accord people we don't know personally but whom we feel we can have satisfactory exchange with. That individuals can experience some degrees of thick trust is obviously necessary for psychological and social well-being, but thin trust becomes especially relevant in civic contexts.

Knowledge

Knowledge, in the form of reliable, referential cognizance of the social world is indispensable for the vitality of democracy. A subset of knowledge is competencies, and in particular, the skills to deal communicatively in the socio-political world are pivotal. Some degree of literacy is essential; people must be able to make sense of that which circulates in the public sphere and to understand the world they live in. Education, in its many forms, will thus always retain its relevance for democracy, even if its contents and goals often need to be critically examined.

While it seems rather obvious that people must have access to reliable reports, portrayals, analyses, discussions, debates and so forth about current
affairs, it is also becoming more challenging to specify access to knowledge, as socio-cultural heterogeneity increases and as the media landscape evolves. Access also includes issues of linguistic capacity and cultural proximity. This of course reiterates the need for multiple public spheres, characterised by sufficient autonomy and diversity to address and incorporate different groups. Thus, precisely what kinds of knowledge and competencies are required by whom for the vitality of a civic culture can never be established once and for all.

There is a further nuance needed too. Modes of knowledge are evolving, especially among the young, in keeping with cultural changes. New media technologies can promote new modalities of thought and expression, new ways of knowing and forms of communicative competencies. With regard to both knowledge and competencies, we must take into account the array of different forms and inflections that can exist between individuals and groups. This on the one hand speaks to and for democratic pluralism, yet on the other hand we must be alert to the question of the efficacies of different modalities of knowledge in the face of dominant power. For example, intuitive forms of knowing and expressive modes of communication among some groups may not always be politically effective in a political culture where the elites operate within the terms of technocratic rationality.

Practices

Democracy must be embodied in concrete, recurring practices - individual, group and collective - relevant for diverse situations. Such practices help generate personal and social meaning to the ideals of democracy. They must have some element of the routine, of the taken for granted about them, if they are to be a part of a civic culture, yet the potential for spontaneous interventions, one-off, novel forms of practice, needs to be kept viable. In a sense, civic culture needs meta-rules for breaking the normal rules. Elections can be seen as a routine form of practice in this regard, but a civic culture requires many other practices, pertinent to many other circumstances in everyday life, to civil and political society. For example, organising campaigns, holding meetings, and managing discussions, can be seen as important practices of the lifeworld that have bearing on civic culture; these in turn obviously link up with knowledge and competencies.

Across time, practices become traditions and experience becomes collective memory. Today's democracy needs to be able to refer to a past, without being locked in it. New practices and traditions can and must evolve to ensure that democracy does not stagnate. The mass media obviously contribute here by their selective representations (and exclusions) of ongoing political life, including its rituals and symbols. Yet the newer ICT (information and communication technology) increasingly takes on relevance as more people make use of the newer possibilities and incorporate these as part of their political practices (for example, activist mobilisation via the Internet).

Identities

In the recent expansive literature on citizenship an important theme has been its subjective side (cf. Mouffe, 1992; Clarke, 1996; Ellison, 2000; Isin and Wood, 1999; Preston, 1997). While the formal and legal attributes of citizenship are no less central today, many observers emphasise the importance of understanding citizenship also as a form of identity, often analytically linking this to elements in lived everyday culture. Today, identity is understood as plural: in our daily lives we operate in a multitude of different 'worlds' or realities; we carry within us different sets of knowledge, assumptions, rules and roles for different circumstances. All of us are to varying degrees composite people. For democracy to work, people need to see themselves at least in some way as citizens, though it should be clear that few people find that the actual word 'citizen' gets their adrenaline flowing - what is at stake is not a label, but the subjectivity of membership and efficacy. Citizenship is central to the issues of social belonging and social participation.

To see citizenship as one dimension of our identity may also help us to avoid letting our democratic ideals generate a predefined, one-size-fits-all portrait of citizenship that is sociologically and psychologically unrealistic. There are many ways of being a citizen and of doing democracy. Identities of membership are not just subjectively produced by individuals, but evolve in relation to social milieus and institutional mechanisms. We should see the citizen component of late modern individuals as increasingly multidimensional and protean.

Discussion

Discussion among citizens is a cornerstone of the public sphere and a key to most formulations of neo-republicanism, radical or 'strong' democracy and certainly deliberative democracy. This dimension has a 'meta'-quality about it, however: it is through discussion - or, more simply, talk - that much of the substance of the other dimensions becomes actualised, circulated and reinforced. At the same time, the specific attributes of citizens' talk, and not least the factors that can impinge on it, can be seen as an integral element of civic culture. We can empirically investigate civic talk by examining, for instance, its various discursive modes, its spatial and contextual sites and settings, its social circumstances. We might look at what tacit rules are operative in these contexts, and how mechanisms of social etiquette about talk can either promote or hinder the practices of public discussion. Eliasoph (1998), reveals in a detailed ethnographic study the troubling socio-cultural patterns that inhibit discursive practices in American civic culture, contributing to what she calls the 'evaporation' of the public sphere. A good deal of civic
discussion today takes place on the Internet, not only in explicit public fora, but also within varieties of online journalism and within the networking of activist organisations and mobilisation.

Clearly, not all the communicative interaction of everyday life should be treated as civic discussion; in fact, I am sure that only a small portion of it is. Yet, we cannot always know in advance just what talk of a pre-political nature will, within the context of ongoing interaction, turn, perhaps indirectly, towards the political. There has recently been some argument as to whether political talk among citizens is best understood as grounded in the informal flowing character of everyday speech, or should rather be seen as a separate and distinct mode of discursive activity. Schudson (1997) has made the controversial case that "conversation is not the soul of democracy". His point is that "conversation" is basically about sociability. Political discussion, on the other hand, is about solving problems, finding solutions to conflicts; it is purposive, goal-oriented. Democratic deliberation is not "spontaneous"; rather it is civil, public and not even necessarily egalitarian. It opens up the door for social discomfort, seemingly the opposite of what is usually intended with conversation.

However, it appears that Schudson and others are operating with an understanding of political discussion that is rather bounded, indeed, one might call it "formal". Political discussion thus is associated with a specific kind of context; it becomes situationally distinct from other modes of talk. One can certainly work with this kind of definition, but the neo-republican perspective would claim that while these formal contexts do exist, we need to look beyond these settings. It emphasises instead the permeability of contexts, the messiness and unpredictability of everyday talk in order to put forward the view that "the political", and thus the individual's role as citizen, is never a priori given, but can emerge in various ways, to which political analysis has to attend.

**Democracy and civic culture in the evolving media milieu**

The media as institutions that shape so much of our symbolic environment, that provide resources for information, and for interactive communication, become salient — in different ways — at each of the six dimensions. I begin this section by specifying in a summary way the prevalent vectors of change in the media and their potential significance for democracy.

Here we can make use of an extensive contemporary literature (cf. Herman and McChesney, 1997; Lacroix and Tembla, 1997; Sussman, 1997; McChesney, 1999; Baker, 2002; Bagdikian, 2000; Preston, 2001; Axford and Huggins, 2001; Bennett and Entman, 2001; Croteau and Hoynes, 2001). This literature indicates mutually reinforcing structural and technological trends that are dramatically changing the media landscape, among them proliferation (i.e., ever increasing media output), commercialisation, concentration, convergence, globalisation, and digitalisation.

The general analytic consensus here is that at least in terms of the mass media in the industrialised nations, these developments are not at present contributing to a more robust democracy with engaged citizens. Of course there are exceptions, as one moves to more detailed levels of analysis. The current negative role of the mass media can be exemplified in a variety of ways.

Thus, from familiar angles, we can strongly hypothesise that overarching mass-mediated ideological climates will have a bearing on the dimensions of civic culture. One might suggest, for example, that the observed rise in cynicism toward the political system is in part a response to portrayals that in various ways undercut traditional democratic values and identities, making them appear naive and outdated. The case that is made for the mass media contributing to political disengagement by their very modes of representation thus certainly needs further research.

From a related perspective, in a period when market neo-liberalism has such a prominent position in media discourses, it is not surprising to witness that economism permeates much political discourse. Politics, not least as manifested in election campaigns, accentuates the "bottom line" of budgets, rising social costs, measures for cut-backs, etc. Normative visions, emphasising democratic values, become increasingly in short supply as financial calculations marginalise other concerns. We find also that the sections for "economic news", both in the press and on television, have been expanding. This is partly a result of more coverage being devoted to economic and financial matters. However, we also see that many topics of social and political character increasingly end up in the economic sections of newspapers and programmes, here framed as economic rather than social or political issues.

In tandem with economism we find consumerism as an ideological vector in political discourses too. While the role of the citizen has become increasingly entwined with that of the consumer in late modern society and the two can no longer be seen as directly antithetical, the discursive modes of consumerism accentuate market relations and individual satisfaction, rather than democratic principles and such values as justice, equality and solidarity.

As another example, we can note that the democratic values of openness and tolerance, which we can readily link to the dimensions of identity and affinity, certainly took a drop after the traumatic events of 11 September, 2001. Not just the USA, but even many countries of Western Europe, witnessed a contraction of the public sphere in the wake of the launching of the ‘War Against Terrorism’. The media by and large contributed to a drastic polarisation in the public climate by reproducing and legitimating the power elite’s message ‘You are either totally with us or you are supporting terrorism’. This left little room for political nuance or for analysis of the social origins of terrorism. The experiences of 11 September not least in their mediated form gave rise to a strong manifestation of civic support among Americans.
This positive turn, however, was embedded in a troubling atmosphere of ‘Us vs. Them’ that emerged in the US as well as in other Western countries, underscored by the harassment of people with Arab or Muslim features. (In Sweden, for instance, a number of Iranian immigrants were also – albeit ‘erroneously’ – victimised.)

Identities and affinities have also been at stake in the recent successes of right-wing populist parties in Western Europe who have been strongly pushing anti-immigration policies. The road to harmonious and democratic multicultural societies is rough, to say the least, and the origins of racist and anti-immigrant sentiment are complex. While the 11 September events no doubt fuelled these fires, we must also look at the routine mechanisms of journalism. The edict ‘bad news is good news’ is particularly problematic here. In many Western European countries, large segments of the citizenry have little or no personal contact with immigrants. Their perceptions are shaped to a great extent by media images. In the logic of daily journalism, immigrants figure most often in ‘negative’ news: social problems, crime, costs for welfare and social services. Obviously there is no quick fix to be had here, but from the long term horizon of civic culture, self-reflection is in order. Even the non-journalistic positive visibility in the media of people with appearance, speech or names that signal ‘immigrant’ is crucial.

Among the perennial dilemmas of democracy has been the generally low level of political knowledge among citizens, a problem that pollsters and other social scientists have been wrestling with since the 1930s (cf. Lewis, 2001). As I mentioned earlier, we must be prepared for the dimension of knowledge and competency to take new forms as media culture evolves. Yet, for most of the citizenry most of the time, basic referential knowledge in the form of factual information is still highly relevant, and the traditional role of journalism has not yet been eclipsed, even if its circumstances are changing. The public, however, also bears a responsibility and established patterns of media use are a key – and clearly problematic – element in the practices of civic culture.

It is all too easy to stockpile a litany of negative features about the mass media’s role in shaping civic culture. Obviously many claims, assumptions and hypotheses need to be nuanced by empirical investigation. Moreover, it becomes all the more difficult to simply isolate ‘the mass media’ as unified actors; their power is relative to other institutions and actors and they are by no means thoroughly homogeneous. We should continue to register the positive import they can have for civic culture, even if the gap between ideals and reality is at times painfully large for many citizens.

Net reconfigurations

One of the claims often made with regard to journalism is that the world is so vast and complicated that it is impossible for any one journalistic organisation to cover it adequately. In this light, the emergence of the Internet with its capacities for personalising and targeting information retrieval, coupled with the fragmentation of the public, becomes highly relevant. The media trends noted above – commercialisation, concentration, etc. – can be seen in the newer interactive media as well, even as this distinction between mass and interactive media becomes increasingly difficult to maintain. The older media move into the Internet, and it in turn manifests more attributes of ‘mass communication’. The Internet’s political economy suggests that its development is quickly veering toward the commercialisation that characterises the traditional media model (Patekis, 2000). It has by now also become an integrated element in the dynamics of global capitalism (Schiller, 1999). Market logic together with emerging legal frameworks may well serve to diminish this as a properly ‘communicative space’ (Lessig, 1999; 2001).

However, despite the threat to its civic potential, for the time being it is in particular the capacity for ‘horizontal communication’ that has focused attention on the Internet’s special role and status in the development of new or alternative extra-parliamentarian politics.

At the outset of this chapter I made reference to contemporary discussions of democracy and how they often consist of two different narratives, one a lament of sorts, about stagnation, disengagement, cynicism, the other an acclamation heralding a growing vitality of engagement in the newer, alternative extra-parliamentarian politics. While this is a schematisation in the extreme, it still may serve a heuristic purpose here, as I give closer attention to the Internet.

During the 1990s, as the discussions about the poor health of democracy intensified, the Internet was rapidly leading a media revolution. It did not take long for many observers to connect the two phenomena in an optimistic way. That new information and communication technologies are revolutionising just about all spheres of life in late modern society is of course no news (cf. Dijk, 1999; Slevin, 2000), but there remains ambiguity as to the extent to which they are enhancing democracy (cf. Haan & Loader, 1999; Dahlgren, 2001). Two varying perspectives seem to be emerging. One view posits that while there have been some interesting changes for democracy, on the whole, the import is modest; the Internet is not deemed yet to be a factor of transformation. Among some of the evidence for this perspective (cf. Hill and Hughes, 1998; Margolis and Resnick, 2000; Kohut, 2000) we can find:

- The use of the Internet for civic and political purposes is definitely a minor activity compared to its uses, for example, in entertainment and shopping. Even other, non-news information-seeking on the Internet (for example, health, finance, consumer matters) surpasses that of current affairs and journalism.
• There has not emerged a vast increase in the number of politically engaged citizens. Most people are not politically active, nor have they become so because of the Internet. While the ideological spectrum of discussion on the Internet is broader than in mass media, this has not had much impact on voting patterns or party loyalties.
• One vision has been that the Internet would empower the powerless. This has not been substantiated, and marginalised groups have not as yet had major impacts on power relations in society.

Margolis and Resnick (2000: 14) conclude that ‘There is an extensive political life on the Net, but it is mostly an extension of political life off the Net’. So while the major political actors may engage in online campaigning, lobbying, policy advocacy, organising and so forth, this perspective posits that there does not seem to be a massive political change in sight. The argument is that the Internet has not made much of a difference in the ideological political landscape, it has not helped mobilise more citizens to participate, nor has it altered the ways that politics gets done.

This evidence cannot be lightly dismissed, but what should be emphasized is that this perspective is anchored in sets of assumptions that largely do not see beyond the formal political system, and the traditional role of the media in respect of the system. Indeed, much of the evidence is based on electoral politics, in the US. While the problems of democracy are acknowledged, the view is that the solutions lie in revitalising the traditional models of political participation and patterns of communication. Other scholars alternatively take as their point of departure the understanding that we are being ushered into a new, transitional era in which the certitudes of the past in regard to how democracy works are now problematic. Democracy is seen to be, precariously, at a new historical juncture.

However, any serious consideration of the current and future health of democracy cannot simply dismiss the central importance of electoral politics, as if a more robust democracy will emerge by blithely side-stepping the traditional, formal structures and procedures. New politics can challenge, inspire and help renew traditional politics, but cannot fully replace this fundamental core of a democratic system. We must retain a view that encompasses both and underscores the articulations between them. From such an horizon the various dimensions of civic culture must be seen as ever-relevant for electoral politics, even if it means confronting severe problems. Yet at present, it is clearly in the fissures generated by the turbulence of the traditional media, and changing socio-cultural patterns, that we can begin to glimpse the best hopes for a civic culture and democracy that are resourced by the Internet.

In their recent survey of the available research from political science, Graber et al. (2002) note ‘...the literature on interest networks and global activism seems particularly rich in examples of how various uses of the Internet and the Web have transformed activism, political pressure, and public communication strategies .... Research on civic organizations and political mobilization is characterized by findings showing potentially large effects of new media and for the breadth of directly applicable theory’ (2002: 3-4). We should proceed with caution here, keeping in mind that it is indeed as yet a very small minority of the population that is civically and politically engaged online, and that the political uses of the Internet are modest compared to other uses. Yet there, in the margins, may be something profound that is beginning to take shape in how democracy gets done. If we switch lenses and look from this alternative view, there is evidence that speaks for a much more robust contribution. Even a cursory examination of the kinds of civic communication present on the Internet – and the engagements and activities beyond the Internet to which such communications often point – will tell us that there is a vast array of serious and highly competent manifestations that reflect and promote robust reconfigurations of the prevailing civic culture. Looked at from the standpoint of any and all of our six dimensions, there are clear alternatives emerging on the Internet. I cannot here attempt any comprehensive overview, but will point to a few suggestive examples that seek to foster civic engagement in democratic and politically progressive ways. I use as a convenient starting point for this excursion the website of the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement (CCCE) at the University of Washington (www.engagedcitizen.org/). The Center has not only many links and other resources, it also carries on research on new forms of democratic participation, with an emphasis on Internet use.

Among the topics being studied here are the campaigns against the WTO, IMF and the World Bank, as well as the Microsoft anti-trust campaign, various campaigns for human rights and about political consumerism. The anti-sweatshop movement also figures prominently (see the European branch at www.cleanclothes.org). The actors behind the websites have widely different profiles; they range from NGOs and foundation-sponsored non-profit organisations to social movements, political activist groups, labour unions, church groups, professional collectivities from various fields, and even in some cases, commercial entrepreneurs who believe that business can be combined with progressive social values (for example, www.workingforchange.com). Some of the activist groups/networks are well-established and have been in existence a long time, while others, such as Attac (www.attac.org/) are newer.

Under the rubric 'Citizen Search Engines' on the CCCE site are a number of what could be called 'civic portals': websites that usher into vast alternative public spheres. Global Exchange, for example (http://globalexchange.org/) is an umbrella site dedicated to 'building people-to-people ties'; it not only has links to such broad themes as the global economy and to many ongoing campaigns, but also to sites offering 'Education for Action', and...
'Reality Tours'. Action Without Borders (www.idealists.org/), another civic clearing-house, has links to 27,000 organisations, 186 ongoing campaigns, and circa 6800 volunteer opportunities. That these websites and those they link to support democratic values is obvious, but they clearly also encourage values that are congruent with participatory versions of democracy. The emphasis on activism, engagement, networking, community and so on, points to values that differ markedly from those found in the mainstream media, where collective civic and political action outside the formal political arena is usually treated with restraint if not scepticism. Indeed, there are a number of websites that explicitly address such issues as civic values and community with an educational perspective (for example, The Civic Network: http://civic.net/).

The emphasis on networking, information sharing and alliance building also underscores the sense of civic affinity. There is a strong neo-republican tone that promotes a climate of solidarity and trust among activists, a feeling of commonality between all those who in various ways are struggling for progressive social change. One is continuously invited to join this quasi 'community of activists'. These are groups that are critical of the system, especially as it manifests itself in neo-liberal globalisation, but in a left-liberal reformist way; there is little in the way of revolutionary rhetoric. Looking at an established (since the late 1980s) website like the Institute for Global Communication (IGC) (www.icg.org/), which also functions as a sort of meta-organisation, we find in turn extensive links to PeaceNet, EcoNet, WomensNet, and Anti-racismNet, suggesting some more areas in which new modes of civic culture are emerging. IGC together with other organisations launched the Association for Progressive Communication (APC) in 1990 (www.apc.org/), comprised of 25 active member organisations and 40 affiliates working in 130 countries. The APC provides effective communication and information-sharing to NGOs and citizen activist groups; the IGC and APC also cooperate with the UN in a number of ways. Affinity is thus becoming increasingly cosmopolitan, even if notions about 'global citizenship' are contested in the academic literature. An optimistic perspective on this pertinent theme is found in Castells' trilogy (1996, 1997, 1998), as well as in Delany (2000) and Barber (2000); more sceptical accounts that underscore the tenacity of nation-state identity are offered by Miller (2000) and Schlesinger (2000).

Within this sprawling political terrain one can notice some social distinctions between the presumed target audience/users. Thus, Democracy 2000 (www.democracy2000.org/) is aimed at community leaders, law makers, educators and the like, while Reclaim the Streets (http://rts.gn.apc.org/) seemingly addresses groups that are younger and less established - and more militant. Such social distinctions remind us of the importance of diversity even within the realm of alternative public spheres, yet, despite the different rhetoric and target groups, such sites each in their own way both manifest and argue for strong civic affinities, for the commonality and trust necessary for a viable civic culture.

Knowledge is a strongly highlighted dimension in this terrain. Most of these websites have updates, news, analyses, links to resources, etc.; information-sharing tools are common (including Internet skills), and there is a climate of self-help, that suggests learning by both doing and studying. On many of these websites there is not only a sharing of information and experience, but also coverage of current events - often of course specific to the focus of the website. For example www.corpwatch.org/ monitors the actions of major corporations and financial institutions, while www.oneworld.org/ emphasises news about environmental issues and democracy. In fact, what is emerging is a vigorous and serious alternative journalism. Some websites are even explicitly and exclusively geared to presenting alternative journalism, e.g. www.alternet.org/, www.zmag.org/, www.fair.org, www.indymedia.org/. There are even sites dedicated to critically monitoring the mainstream media (cf. www.mediachannel.org/). While there have been recent studies of what happens when journalism goes online (for example, Pavlik, 2001), even from critical perspectives (cf. Hall, 2001), the perspective is largely on actors from the dominant mass media moving into the Internet. Even a recent ambitious and useful study of alternative media (Atton, 2002) just begins to scratch the surface of this important development.

One would have to make a detailed study of the knowledge and competencies promoted on these websites to speak in any authoritative manner about them. But impressionistically it seems that there is both a strong emphasis on practically useful as well as analytic knowledge, which implicitly and not infrequently explicitly challenges the dominant frames of reference and lines of interpretation that are found in the mass media. In many cases, though not all, the knowledge and competence derive horizontally; that is, they are shared among engaged citizens, and have less of a hierarchical, professional register.

In terms of practices, there are of course many that are advocated. It could be argued that knowledge and competency development are indeed among the foremost practices here. A list of the kinds of practices fostered would be both long and unsurprising; we could simply summarise by saying that the kind of citizenship envisioned on these websites is one that is constituted in and through practices: democracy is something that is done, enacted by citizens in various contexts. This sense of doing democracy is obviously integral to the kinds of identity found. It is through the many forms of civic activity in cooperation with others that one constructs and maintains citizen identities. One can sense a classic dialectic hovering between the lines on many of these websites: they intend to provide the knowledge and competencies needed to participate; the thus empowered citizen engages in practice, leading to new knowledge and competencies - as well as a strengthened civic identity. The mode of address often suggests this. Under www.idealists.org/, for example,
is a section for ‘Kids and teens’. There we can read things such as, ‘Think you’re too young to start your own organisation? Maybe you’ll reconsider after seeing what these kids have done’. Also: ‘Take the lead: have an idea for changing your neighborhood, your school or the world? Find resources, project ideas and organizations that can help get you started’.

Discussion appears on many of the sites, but of course it can be argued that the parameters are narrow, given the relatively homogeneous political character of most of the participants. I mentioned above that the dimension of discussion is a sort of meta-category, where values, affinity, knowledge, etc. are circulated and at times generated. It is this kind of discussion that has to do with reinforcing the general worldview, exchanging experiences, cementing collective identity, and weighing strategic options for activities that is most prevalent, rather than debate between opposing views. On the journalistic sites one finds more examples of discussion with varying viewpoints, though the spectrum of positions tends to be narrow, as might be expected.

As the public sphere extends out to the Internet, and the terrain of new politics continues to grow, mainstream journalism on the Internet will need to keep the communicative spaces open between the pre-political and the political, between traditional and new politics. We should remind ourselves that we are still only in the first stages of a new media era, and clarity about the significance of these media may well have to wait a while, as citizens develop new ways of being ‘seeker, consultant, browser, respondent, interlocutor, and conversationalist’ (McQuail, 1997: 129).

The trends in modern democracy articulate in complex ways with the evolution of the media. Mediation is entwined with the declining engagement in traditional electoral politics, as well as with the emergence of a newer, informal politics. A functioning democracy requires a creative interplay between new and traditional politics. At present, this development has not appeared on the horizon but a more expansive civic culture framework will allow us to recognise it when it does.

Note

I would like to express my thanks to John Corner for helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this chapter.

References

The Popular Public

The predominance of the mass media in contemporary democratic processes provokes considerable anxiety on the part of many political and cultural critics about the potential pernicious effects of the media on democratic politics. Such critics deploy a variety of arguments to express their concerns about democracy in a mediated age, but perhaps a common feature of their concerns is that the cultural context in which democracy operates is inhospitable. The cultural context is one of popular culture that is produced, disseminated and consumed in and through media technologies. The most influential thesis about the inappropriateness of popular or mass culture for 'genuinely' democratic politics was established by the Frankfurt School theorists Horkheimer and Adorno (1993) in their paradigmatic essay written in Los Angeles during World War II. Their analysis of the commodification of culture, organised along the lines of a capitalist industry, led them to conclude that the very mode of mass culture functions to promote the ideological deception that real human needs are fulfilled by the consumption of culture reduced to entertainment. By organising conformism and promoting a substitute gratification, the culture industry 'impedes the development of autonomous, independent individuals who ... would be the precondition for a democratic society' (Adorno, 1991: 92).

The view rests on a Marxist logic according to which if people were able to make a genuinely enlightened, substantively rational democratic choice, they would not accept capitalist domination. This view has been absorbed by significant tendencies in cultural studies that remain pessimistic about the democratic potential of popular culture. For the pessimists, the commercial and corporate organisation of media technologies entails that mass cultural activity is commodified in a capitalist media industry that maintains the