Citizens, Consumers and the Demands of Market-Driven News

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In most appraisals of democracy today the media figures prominently (Dahlgren, 2000). As the main channel of communication between elected representatives and citizens, the performance of the media is much debated and often maligned. Given this position, a large amount of academic research has grappled with the impact of the media on 'civic engagement' or elements of citizenship. Unsurprisingly, given the complexities of untangling media and audience interplay, and the size of the issues at stake, consensus has been difficult to achieve.

The task of assessing media performance in terms of facilitating democratic engagement and civic values might be easier in a static environment, but given the dramatic structural, cultural and technological changes to the media environment in the past 30 years, this job becomes even more daunting. It is therefore my intention to pull-together and extend some current strands of thinking on the relationship between the media and the electorate.

More specifically, this involves considering what conception of voters the news media provide, both implicit and explicit. How are people encouraged to view politics? Does it reflect and encourage an electorate that is a spectator rather than a political participant? Do journalists, editors and producers see their job as serving the informational needs of citizens, or as competing for the attention of entertainment-hungry consumers? I will argue that due to changes in the media environment it is increasingly becoming the latter. This has had mixed consequences for media output and the images of public affairs offered to audiences. If taken as a whole, I argue the media currently serves the differing informational needs of its audiences well, and offers many outlets for active citizen expression. But at the same time, there is reason to believe that some trends in journalism can be encouraging audience passivity and even disconnecting audiences from the power to participate actively in political life.

My focus will be largely on the news media (in the UK, with an occasional sideways glance elsewhere), but given the increasingly

blurred boundaries between journalism and mediated popular culture (Brants, 1998; Dahlgren, 2000; Street, 2001; 2004), consideration will also be given to other media outputs. As political, social and consumerist discourses become ever more intertextual (Miles, 1998; Slater, 1997), so the relationship between civic and consumer culture also overlaps. I will therefore consider some of the implications of this for democratic engagement.

News media organisations and their audience: from a community of citizens to a market of consumers?

Stanyer (2007) claims that 30 or 40 yrs ago the main news organisations in the US and UK saw their audience first and foremost as members of a national political community, and their role was to cater for their informational needs. Newspaper journalists had a commitment to providing accurate and factual information, and to serve the public as a whole, rather than particular interests (Hallin, 2000). This role was facilitated by their external environment, where newspapers were relatively sheltered from economic forces due to a stable income from advertisers, little direct competition for this revenue from broadcasters, and stable consumption patterns from readers (Patterson, 2000; Seymour-Ure, 1991; Stanyer, 2007). The same held for broadcasters, both commercial and public service broadcasters (PSB), whose ethos was to educate, inform and entertain (Curran and Seaton, 2003). This conception of the audience as citizens was enforced through regulators, who tightly monitored broadcasting output to ensure it met the standards for an informed and engaged citizenry. According to Stanyer, (2007), over much of the 20th century, the news media thus embraced their civic role. Journalism was seen as a public service, and the role of the news media was to provide a community of citizens with information on which to make political decisions, and act as a forum for expression of public opinion (Hallin 1992; Seymour-Ure 1991).

The news media’s citizen-centred outlook arguably faded from the 1980s, as the media environment as a whole underwent rapid transformation. A number of factors combined to bring about this change (See McNair, 1999; 2006; Stanyer, 2007; Swanson, 2001; Tunstall, 2002). Increasingly liberal government media policy eroded barriers to merger, acquisition and expansion in the media, and spelled an end to spectrum scarcity. The broadcasting environment in particular vastly changed since 1990 and the launch of satellite multi-channel television, meaning terrestrial

channels no longer had a monopoly on broadcast news. Alongside this was the revolution in new technology, facilitating the expansion of multi-channel television through digitalisation, and providing an entirely new platform for media expansion: the Internet. These developments transformed the information environment, seeing an explosion in the number of news outlets and intensification of competition for audiences among them.

Alongside the dramatic changes in the media environment in the last 30 years have been important cultural changes in their audience. In particular, the rise of a consumer culture which is based around consumption and individuality (Bauman, 2001; Firat and Dholakia, 1998; Wernick, 1991 – for a more detailed account of this **see Scullion chapter in this book**). News media audiences are thus increasingly behaving like consumers in the media market, so given greater choice, they have responded by relinquishing their former loyalties, and increasingly obtaining their news from a wider variety of sources (Dahlgren, 2000; Norris, 2000; Tunstall, 1996). Traditional news outlets such as evening television news broadcasts and newspapers have seen a decline in their audience figures, as more people migrate to alternative news sources offered by new media technologies. Although the cause-and-effect relations between the media and audiences are hard to disentangle in this cycle of information and economic change, there has been one significant consequence: given the hyper-competitive market for news provision, almost all large news media organisations during the 1990s gradually shifted from a citizen-centred model of news to a market-oriented one (Franklin, 1997; Stanyer, 2007; Underwood, 1998). News effectively became a commodity enterprise run by market-oriented managers, and these authors argue that audiences are now seen as consumers first and foremost, not citizens (see Langer, 2003; Bennett, 2000). According to Stanyer (2007), this rethink stretches across the divide between popular and serious, and commercial and license-funded media. The consumer-centred approach has now become taken for granted by most large news organisations as the way to do news (Attaway-Fink, 2004; Beam, 2001 cited in Stanyer, 2007).

So if we accept this reconceptualisation of the news media’s role vis-à-vis their audiences, then what are the consequences of this for media output, and its subsequent ramifications for democracy? Let us start by considering the potential problems of this change, before some more optimistic perspectives are explored.

Market-driven news and dumbing down

Due to open markets and an accompanying relaxation of corporate social responsibility norms, the political economy perspective sees the news media as increasingly promoting business decisions above public service and public interest (Bennett, 2000). News organisations now commonly adopt the consumer model, where the demands of consumers are catered for, as well as often created. The introduction of market research, aiming to understand the preferences of audiences, is now commonly used as a method of increasing profits (Attaway-Fink, 2004; Stanyer, 2007). Prominent themes to emerge from early newspaper audience research were:

- Audiences as a whole had a limited appetite for political affairs.
- The most popular items tended not to be ones most associated with traditional journalism, such as the comic strip and sport. Human interest stories were very popular.
- Upmarket readers liked light news and human interest stories as seen in downmarket papers; but this does not work the other way round – so tabloid readers were not interested in financial or foreign news.
- Readers responded to price and other marketing inducements. Promotions and freebies work (See Tunstall, 1996, pp. 217-218).

With market research pointing in the direction of a smaller proportion of hard news, many would argue that financial imperatives meant news organisations were quick to follow. The result according to some critics is that firstly ‘hard news’ has been marginalised, and secondly, the direction of news media has been transformed strikingly in the direction of more dramatized, entertainment-oriented, and personality-centred images of society and politics (Barnett, 2002; Bourdieu, 1998; Brants and Neijens, 1998; Franklin, 2004; Pfetsch, 1996). In the British context, Bob Franklin (1997) sees these developments as representing a downward trend in political coverage. He argues that: “news media have increasingly become part of the entertainment industry instead of providing a forum for informed debate of key issues of public concern” (Franklin, 1997, p. 4). The result is that:

> Journalism’s editorial priorities have changed. Entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human interest has supplanted the public interest; measured judgement has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities, from soap operas, the world of sport or the royal family are judged more “newsworthy” than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional values have been replaced by new values; “infotainment” is rampant (Franklin, 1997, p. 4).

The evidence for Franklin’s claims in the UK however is ambiguous. This is not helped by the scarcity of systematic or

comparative research, as well as the problems of classifying what constitutes ‘infotainment’ or ‘dumbing down’. There is evidence that tabloid newspapers, driven by market research, have largely abandoned coverage of subjects that do not attract readers (Rooney, 2000). This has inevitably led to more celebrity gossip, crime stories and sports coverage, but less foreign news and coverage of government (Carper, 1997; Curran and Seaton, 1997; McLachlan & Golding, 2000; Sparks, 2000). Broadsheet coverage of Parliament has declined over time (Franklin, 1997; McKie, 1999; McLachlan & Golding, 2000; Negrine, 1999; Straw, 1993), though whether this is cause for alarm is open to debate. There is little systematic evidence as to whether broadsheets have replaced ‘hard news’ with softer stories, though many have still argued that they are increasingly trying to attract audience share by injecting entertainment values into news stories (Brants, 1998; Brants and Neijens, 1998; McLachlan & Golding, 2000; Pfetsch, 1996; Bromley, 2001).

Like newspapers, all broadcasters are under increasing pressure to rationalise their budgets, service more outlets and increase audiences at the very time that competition is growing not just from more channels but from on-line news sources (Barnett et al., 2000). ‘Accessibility’ and ‘consumer-friendliness’ have arguably become more important for broadcasters, given their shrinking audiences. Commercial channels like ITV and Channel 5 have adopted this most wholeheartedly, but the BBC, through its organisational need for popularity, has not been immune either, as reflected in the findings of recent internal reviews in news provision (see BBC, 2002). For some, terms like ‘consumer-friendliness’ mean widening the appeal of politics, but for others this argument can quickly become one for displacing serious political coverage with trivial and ‘catchy’ stories. Looking at current affairs broadcasting outside of news programmes, the consumer-centred model might also explain why hard-hitting documentaries have been decomissioned or shifted to the periphery of schedules, and less challenging but profit-maximising ones like ‘Tonight with Trevor Macdonald’ or a myriad of docu-soaps are offered instead (see Tumber, 2001).

It is the consumer-centred and market-driven nature of the modern news media that has encouraged downward trends in news provision according to these critics. If substantial and weighty news is superseded by the trivial, then the ability of audiences to engage with political life is compromised. For Bennett (1992), the result of a media concerned with the spectacle of news is that it can disconnect its audience from the power to participate actively in political life. They are “passive receivers, no longer active participants, in the dialogue of democracy” (Franklin, 2004, p. 14).

Politics as a specialist interest: media coverage of elections

Trends in media coverage of elections can also be explained by the re-conceptualisation of the audience from citizen to consumer. This can be seen in the amount of space devoted to election news in many media outlets as well as its direction. Given their apparent limited appetite for political information, news organisations are under increasing pressure to ration the amount of news items that may be worthy but do not attract the biggest audiences. So as not to risk haemorrhaging audiences, mainstream news outlets have thus reduced their coverage of elections, while simultaneously placing more material in niche supplements or online (Stanyer, 2007). Analysis of television coverage of general elections for example has shown that the amount of news devoted to the campaign on some terrestrial channels has fallen markedly since studies began in 1992, with BBC1 and BBC2 coverage almost halving (Deacon et al., 2005). The decline of election coverage in the British popular press is even more alarming, with Deacon et al. noting an increasing disengagement with the formal political process. Out of a possible 21 days of campaigning, the *Sun*, *Mirror* and the *Star* carried campaign news on their front pages in 2005 on seven, five and three days respectively (Stanyer, 2007). Broadsheets have maintained their coverage of general elections, but their substantial coverage can often be found in specialist supplements rather than the main sections. News coverage of second-order elections such as local or European elections is very low across the British media, and has virtually disappeared in the popular press (de Vreese et al., 2006; Peter et al., 2004).

Alongside the decline of elections and political affairs in main news outlets has been a growth in material on the web and 24-hour news channels. Such platforms provide an endless supply of information and comment for the engaged citizen, but there is little evidence so far that it has reached beyond the interested minority (see Schifferes et al., 2007). Shared experiences of political affairs via the mass media are therefore arguably in retreat: “Detailed election coverage, once a feature of mainstream news, is now treated as a specialist interest, there if the consumer wants it” (Stanyer, 2007, p. 117). The worrying outcome of such trends is that they may have damaging implications for political knowledge, interest and participation, as it becomes much easier for audiences to *avoid* substantive political coverage than ever before.

The *direction* of election coverage is another concern for many.

The political economy of the media and the need to attract audiences can explain the shift in media agendas from one focused on substantive issues, to one dominated by political scandal (Lull & Hinerman, 1997), campaigning strategies (e.g. Entman, 1989; Jamieson, 1992; Lichter & Noyes, 1996) and sports metaphors (Patterson, 1993). As the newsworthiness of election items comes under increasing scrutiny, the strategy news frame or 'game schema' arguably fits many news values that issue-based coverage does not. For example, previous research on news values has found that 'human interest', 'conflict', 'shared narratives' (e.g. Good Vs Evil) and 'controversy' are central news values (McManus, 1994; Price et al., 1997; Stephens, 1980). As stories that focus on political strategy and the 'game' of politics fit many of the above criteria, so they are more likely to be given space on the news agenda. The rising prominence of these types of reporting have been well documented in the US context, but less so in the UK. Still, election content analysis data tells us that 'electoral process'[1] news represented 44 per cent of all campaign news in 2005 (Deacon et al., 2005), up from 32 per cent in 1997 (Wring, 1997). Comparable data from the 1983 general election shows the figure at 30 per cent for television news and 26 per cent for five national newspapers[2] (Semetko et al., 1991).

For some, politics-as-game journalism is a reasonable response to increasing attempts by politicians to manipulate the electorate through political PR. It has 'demystified' the dark arts of spin doctoring, lending more transparency and balance to the political process (McNair, 2006). They are right, however, when this type of journalism regularly constitutes around half of all election coverage it is probably too much, as in-depth and prolonged attention to substantive issues is compromised. There is also evidence that consistent exposure to strategy-focused news has damaging effects on audiences, undermining their ability to engage with the political issues that they see in the media. This can have two related consequences: the first is that the likelihood of the voter learning from the media is stifled. Consequently, the ability to understand policy issues, generate opinions, and hold politicians to account is thus lost. This can then result in or aggravate a second problem: disenchantment and cynicism towards the political process. As Fallows explains: "By choosing to present public life as a contest between scheming political leaders, all of whom the public should view with suspicion, the mass media helps bring about that very result" (1996, p. 7). There is some evidence to confirm this from empirical research carried out in the USA which has measured the

effects of strategic coverage, usually through experimental methods (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Rhee, 1997; Valentino, Beckmann & Buhr, 2001). It should be noted that there is no evidence for such a demobilising effect in the UK other than a small-scale experimental study, where those exposed to the strategy frame showed more political cynicism than their 'issue' frame (control) counterparts. The effects, however, were only for the less politically sophisticated and engaged, and caution should be exercised over any long-term impact (Jackson, 2005).

It is therefore precisely because of their treatment of the audience as consumer and not citizen that processes described above are able to take place. The supposed squeezing out of 'hard news' in mainstream news outlets at the expense of 'soft news', and the growing trend of emphasising political strategies and conflicts over substantive issues is merely profit-seeking news organisations following what they perceive their audiences to prefer. Though interestingly, Bennett (2001) has argued in the USA that market-driven news does not necessarily have to reflect public demand. For him, low budget people-centred, dramatised news is not so much the result of popular demand as it is the most profitable product to produce. Other information formats at the high-brow end of the scale can turn out to be popular, and they are not losing money, but they are simply not making as much money as low-budget news. In this view, "bad news is not the choice of the people; it is the choice offered to the people" (Bennett, 2000, p. 4), and it is the responsibility of governments to step in to protect news provision from these market pressures. Either way, it is the consequences of commercial imperatives and market-driven journalism that are potentially impoverishing the information landscape.

Constructing a passive audience

What exactly might these trends mean for how people imagine citizenship, public participation, governments, leaders and democratic accountability? There is reason to believe that the way politics is covered, particularly at elections, relegates audiences to passive spectators and not actors (Lewis et al., 2005). Process news for example, and the 'game schema' in particular, through its overwhelming focus on the activities and motivations of elites, constructs politics as a game played by politicians, not ordinary citizens. At precisely the time when citizens should be being mobilised to turnout and vote, studies have shown that they are encouraged to see their role as passive observers of the actions of political elites (Brookes et al.,

2004). When the public are referred to during election coverage it is in a limited capacity. There is very little substantive expression of their opinion, with voter apathy itself a prominent news theme (Brookes et al., 2004; Thomas et al., 2004).

Corporate media: corporate journalism?

So far I have looked at how structural, regulatory and technological changes in the media have had profound implications for how audiences are conceptualised by news organisations. This has created a greater diversity of news offerings and for some critics, has led to standards in journalism to fall. Another critique of the contemporary news media relates to its corporate and commercial bias, which emanate from the organisation and structure of the media itself. As profit-seeking entities, commercial media organisations are reliant on advertising as the primary source of their income. As political economists have noted, this dependence can come at a cost (e.g. Baker, 1994; Hackett, 2001; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Baker (1994, p. 69-70), for example, identifies four consequences of this dependency:

- Advertising discourages critical accounts of advertisers' products, including their inadequacies or dangers. Exposés of wrongdoing by advertisers are also unlikely.
- It encourages political blandness over partisan positions on controversial issues because advertisers want the maximum possible audience and to avoid offending potential consumers.
- In order to promote a buying mood, advertisers want lighter material rather than critical thought or attention to difficult issues that might undermine the ethos of consumerism.
- Because advertisers want consumers who are most able and willing to buy their products, the news media tend to adopt perspectives and serve the informational and entertainment needs of the relatively affluent.

As a newspaper funded entirely by advertising revenue, the Metro perhaps best illustrates this argument. It is aimed primarily at well-educated people in the 15-35 age group, who are most attractive to advertisers (Wilcox, 2005). Its offering is largely apolitical, with minimal comment or political positioning that would be likely to challenge or offend any reader. Costs are low, as news copy is 'cut and pasted' from international news agencies with little or no editorial comment. Critics have argued that it has no independence that a cover price grants, as the ultimate sanction governing the content was displaced from the consumer to

the advertiser (see Wilcox, 2005). With the recent launch of similar ‘copycat’ offerings, such as thelondonpaper and londonlite in the UK, there is even more chance that free newspapers will take readers away from paid-for titles within big cities.

Another sign of the corporate influence on news provision can be seen in the newsroom itself. As news organisations increasingly belong to transnational conglomerates, holding interests in a range of different media and industries, conflicts of interest can bedevil news judgement, as journalists may feel pressured to promote or suppress certain viewpoints about the empire (Hackett, 2005). Newsroom culture in large commercial organisations moves away from an ethos of public service, as journalists are asked to become corporate team players.

Once again, the reconceptualisation of the news audience from citizen to consumer has allowed and even encouraged this situation to develop. The consequences for democracy of a commercially dominated news media system are potentially harmful according to McChesney, as they carry a huge implicit political bias: “Consumerism, class inequality and individualism tend to be taken as natural and even benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values and anti-market activities are marginalised” (McChesney, 2003, p. 36). The news media are thus central in the definition of culture in terms of consumerism and not citizenship. For him, the combination of neoliberal media policies and corporate media culture tends to promote a deep and profound de-politicisation of society, evidence of which can be seen across the western world, and the USA in particular.

The findings of a recent content analysis of British and American news would seem to be consistent with McChesney’s claims. After a comprehensive study of public opinion in the news media, Lewis et al. (2005) concluded that the public are represented more as consumers than citizens. They are largely portrayed as passive and powerless observers of the world, who have fears, impressions and desires, but have little to say about the big issues on the political agenda. They are also reactive to the news agenda, which is set by politicians and other elites. “Their power is limited to the ability to choose one product rather than another – or else, more subversively perhaps, to not buy anything at all” (ibid. p. 138). For Brookes et al. (2004, p. 78), this discursive construction of the apathetic electorate “works ideologically to legitimize a situation in which media and political elites are the key players, while citizens are incapable of making

meaningful contributions to the debate". In a very real sense, therefore, the media are helping establish the political alienation they claim to deplore.

To summarise, there is a large body of opinion, supported by some convincing evidence, that the consumer model adopted by contemporary news organisations encourages the proliferation of certain types of journalism. According to this pessimistic perspective, this can in turn fail to serve the informational needs many citizens and in some cases demobilise parts of the electorate. Secondly, the consumer model, itself a result of market deregulation and changes in the news environment, has (perhaps predictably) encouraged an implicit bias towards consumerist ideology over citizenship in the news media. Again, this can have damaging implications for democracy, as selfish consumption and individuality can take precedence over political participation and civic values.

Diversification not dumbing down: the 'postmodern' perspective

I have so far given a largely pessimistic and one-sided account of the impact of market forces on news output, and what this means for audiences. An optimistic or sometimes labelled 'postmodernist' perspective (McNair, 1999) offers some entirely different interpretations of such changes. Proponents of this view do not dispute the marketisation of the news media in recent years, nor would they disagree with the reconceptualisation of the news audience from citizen to consumer, but they strongly disagree with the consequences, pointing out the many benefits the changes in news provision have brought for citizens. They firstly dispute the concept of wholesale dumbing down of news. Instead, what has taken place is a diversification of news provision, based around the concept of market segmentation (see McNair, 1999; Norris, 2000). They accept that many mainstream news outlets have introduced more 'low-brow' elements like an emphasis on visuals and human interest stories, but this hides the diversity of the overall news market. Concluding their large-scale content analysis of television news, Barnett et al. (2000) note that there has undoubtedly been a shift in most bulletins towards a more tabloid domestic agenda, yet in comparison with other Western countries, the UK's broadcasting environment has arguably resisted many downward trends. What has occurred though is that news bulletins are more tailored to a specific audience and more consciously 'branded'. Distinct editorial policies have emerged to aim for the highbrow, middlebrow or apathetic twenty-somethings. This desire of media outlets to target specific niche

audiences has helped expand the styles and formats of political information, and can arguably provide an incentive to invest in quality journalism, as there is a clear demand for it at one end of the market.

Part of this marketplace of information offerings includes of course the internet, where there are a number of sites that undoubtedly address their audience as citizen. Importantly for us, in contrast to how many mainstream news outlets construct their audiences, online forums, blogs and networks demand active audience participation. Citizens are therefore empowered and given a voice in the public sphere, including some of the resource poor and those with alternative and oppositional viewpoints (Coleman, 2002). Of course, it is important not to exaggerate the overall impact of the internet on democracy so far. The use of the internet for anything to do with politics or the public sphere comes very low on the list of purposes to which it is put to (Hill & Hughes, 1998). What is more, online citizen involvement so far has been largely dominated by the educated and wealthy (Chadwick, 2006). Still, for the motivated minority, it has provided a wealth of opportunity for information exchange and political expression.

Another strand of the ‘postmodernist’ perspective acknowledges some of the trends outlined earlier but dismisses them as harmless or even beneficial to democracy. What might be loosely termed ‘popularisation’ could possibly mobilise engagement in audiences, even in non-traditional ways (Dahlgren, 2000). For example, the collapsing of boundaries between the genres of news, entertainment and drama are redefining what we might call ‘political’, and may result in offerings that are more accessible to broader audiences (see Dahlgren & Sparks, 1992; Street, 2001). These offerings can thus speak to their audience in new and different ways. Daytime chat shows or radio phone-ins, undoubtedly frivolous and trivial at times, nevertheless allow topics from the private sphere into the public often framed as political. This can legitimise the views and experiences of ordinary people, even when faced by ‘expert’ or ‘elite’ opponents (see Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). Talk shows and radio phone-ins are offered at the high-brow and low-brow ends of the market, with programmes such as ‘Question Time’ arguably representing the former and youth-oriented talk shows on T4 or MTV the latter (though these are admittedly only shown sporadically). In these programmes, citizens can scrutinise political elites on issues of their choice. Although the audience and elite guests do not enter on an equal footing, there is still an element of empowerment

given to citizens through the exchanges they offer. Turning back to the representation of audiences as found by Lewis et al. (2005), these types of programmes arguably represent a very different construction of the electorate. Far from being passive, powerless and apathetic, talk shows display an audience that is active, passionate and engaged.

Politics as a ‘lifestyle’ choice

No matter which side of the debate over news media performance you stand on, there can be little doubt that the information environment we are observing is in a state of uncertainty and flux. Traditional ways of receiving the news are under threat as a result of media fragmentation and technological change, meaning shared experiences of news events are in decline. Against a backdrop of increased competition for elusive audiences, media organisations are clearly tailoring their news offerings to the tastes of certain segments of the audience, which they now primarily see as a consumer. Many in the ‘optimistic’ camp are comfortable with this, as the informational needs of most people are catered for. There is also undoubtedly more news and journalism circulating in the public sphere than ever before, which should be considered a good thing (McNair, 1999). However, segmentation and fragmentation do bring potential dangers as well. In a commercially dominated system which is driven by the demands of advertisers, audiences can be segmented by technological access and spending power, not cultural or civic needs (McChesney, 2000). The resulting risk is that some citizens who are less desirable to advertisers are disregarded by the market. As Gandy (2000) explains, the targeting of ever more specialised and smaller groups serves to undercut a common public culture. In this sense, segmentation is implicitly anti-civic and anti-collectivist. As discussed earlier, another emerging feature of political coverage amongst mainstream news organisations has been to steadily cut back on weighty and substantive journalism in their main sections. Instead, it is increasingly offered as a choice for the interested consumer, such as through a newspaper supplement or online. For the interested citizen, there has never been more information available but at the same time it has never been easier to avoid political fare either.

These developments also matter for how the audience is constructed by the media. The ‘postmodernist’ account would point out the vibrant array of TV, radio and online offerings where citizens are active and empowered. They are right. However, these types of programmes are a choice, which only a minority of

citizens choose to take up. There is evidence that mass audience platforms such as the evening news bulletins and national newspapers, present public affairs as a world dominated and shaped by elites, where the audience are spectators not actors. This is a worry, because by representing a passive and apathetic audience of consumers not citizens, they may help bring about that very result (Lewis et al., 2005).

If taken as a whole, the media seems to be reflecting, as well as constructing, what has been termed ‘lifestyle politics’ (see Bennett, 1998; Dahlgren, 2000). Although the term pulls together many diversified tendencies, an important one may be the renegotiation of political engagement and participation from a duty to a lifestyle choice. We therefore arrive at a point whereby one’s ease with these developments depends on where you see the role of the media in democracy, as well as how you conceptualise democratic engagement itself. From the traditional (and perhaps idealistic) perspective of citizenship and democracy, the rise of lifestyle politics represents a worrying move away from collective identity and participation, and towards opportunism and frivolity. For them, a liberal democracy needs an informed citizenry who can make rational decisions based on widely available information. As this information is often complex, untidy, or even held back, so it is the journalist’s job to overcome obstacles and shed light; to act as nation’s watchdog and present information with impartiality and objectivity (see Hackett, 2005).

Those of a more optimistic temperament are less concerned with the move towards politics as a lifestyle choice. Joseph Schumpeter’s (1976) view of democracy for example, suggests that given the complexity of modern issues and the vulnerability of masses to irrational and emotional appeals, ongoing political participation is neither necessary nor even desirable. For many, falling electoral turnout is still of some concern, but it is compensated (and partly explain ed) by the rise of less formal expressions of political engagement, which demonstrate that many people still care deeply about issues that matter to them. From this perspective then, individualised lifestyle politics is not incompatible with a healthy democracy. Looking at the media’s role, in order to participate in political affairs, Norris (2000) argues the media does not need to fill voters with broad civics knowledge, but to provide enough context-specific information to enable them to assess the consequences of their political choices.

Conclusion

These divergent philosophies cannot be easily reconciled, but they provide the intellectual backdrop to understanding some of challenges media change has brought about. Bennett and Entman (2001) identify what they describe as three ‘broad tensions’ facing mature democracies, which this chapter has explored. The first is between diversity and commonality: media fragmentation and segmentation have expanded the genres of what can be termed ‘political’, but shared experiences of politics are under threat. I have already suggested some of the dangers of increased segmentation along commercial lines, but changes in media technology (e.g. mobile text alerts, RSS feeds) mean that a more personalised experience of news and current affairs seems inevitable in the future. The challenge for media practitioners is to maintain a sense of shared identity in their offerings, so as to foster a culture that still values civic life.

The second tension concerns the information necessary for citizens to participate effectively in democratic life, versus the entertainment-driven focus of an increasingly commercial-oriented media. At the crux of this tension lies the question (more relevant than ever) of what news is: is it what the public is interested in, or what is in the public interest? The traditional view, elucidated by Reuvan Frank, former president of NBC News, is emphatically the former: “This business of giving people what they want is a dope pusher’s argument. News is something people don’t know they’re interested in until they hear about it. The job of a journalist is to take what ‘s important and make it interesting” (cited in Hickey, 1998, p. 34). This view is challenged by the new forms of ‘political’ offerings, which are infused with infotainment values. For them, the terms (public interest Vs what the public are interested in) might not have to be mutually exclusive. News organisations like the BBC would no doubt argue they are able to offer mixture of both, even within a single news bulletin. Underwriting this second tension are the market forces of a largely commercial media landscape. Compared to the US system, Britain is still relatively protected from the worst excesses of the market, but this is not inevitable or permanent. The 2003 Communications Act, for example, represented a move towards further commercial influence in the media. There is now a real danger of an erosion of the traditional regulations that ensured commercial broadcasters invested in a range of programmes beyond simply the most profitable (see Barnett, 2002). No matter which side of the dumbing down debate one sits on, both would agree that a range of

news and current affairs outputs is essential, and should be vigorously defended.

The final tension Bennett and Entman identify is between the need of the media to treat people as citizens on the one hand and as consumer publics on the other. If we consider the media environment as a whole, there can be little doubt that we are overwhelmingly addressed as consumers rather than citizens. The circulation of goods, the material and symbolic meanings of commodities, and the dominant position of advertising in its many forms make civic culture look diminutive in comparison (Dahlgren, 2000). Nevertheless, I have argued there are still many widely available media platforms where audiences are encouraged to consider themselves as active citizens, and these are aided by the opportunities that technological change offer. But these are offered as a choice, and so responsibility for the outcomes of these choices increasingly rests with the individual. This is not without its problems though, because representations of the public in mainstream news outlets like the press and evening news appear to do little to encourage an active audience of citizens (Lewis et al., 2005). This is a concern because these are still by far the most popular news platforms available, and are arguably the most important mediums for shaping how audiences imagine public life and their role in it. If most people are fed a diet of news that encourages them to view their role in political affairs as apolitical spectators, then it may be that it discourages them seek-out the mediums where active political engagement is celebrated and encouraged.

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[1] 'Election process' includes discussion of campaigning strategies, opinion polls/ horse race, passing references to the chosen daily topic agendas of political parties, political tensions and infighting within parties, party spin/ PR/ news management, and other themes (Deacon et al., 2005).
[2] Made up of 'opinion polls', and 'party strategies and prospects'. Newspapers analysed were *The Sun, The Mirror, The Daily Mail, The Times* and *The Guardian.*