

# THE MULTIPLICATION OF NEWS PLATFORMS: THE “PRIVATIZATION” OF THE MEDIA

Darin Barney



With the multiplication of media platforms and the dumbing down of the news media, how are serious public policy debates to be conducted in such a diffuse and diverse environment? With so many outlets, and so many voices contending for the public's attention, how do “the media” influence and shape public policy debates and outcomes? McGill's Darin Barney addressed these questions at a recent conference co-sponsored by IRPP and the Trudeau Foundation. “Of all the things that can be said about mobile phones, Blackberries, TV, PlayStation, commercial radio, the iPod, and even many of the Blogs,” he writes, “perhaps the most surprising thing is how very privatizing they have become, despite the deluge of communication they mediate.”

Comment mener de vrais débats politiques quand la multiplication des plateformes médiatiques et l'abâtissement des médias d'information favorisent la confusion et la dispersion des échanges ? Devant cette profusion de lieux et de voix se disputant l'attention du public, comment « les médias » influencent-ils ces débats et le cours des événements ? Darin Barney, de l'Université McGill, a soulevé ces questions lors d'une récente conférence commanditée par l'IRPP et la Fondation Trudeau. « Malgré tout ce qu'on peut dire sur les cellulaires, les Blackberries, la télé, les consoles de jeux, la radio commerciale, les iPod et même de nombreux blogues, observe-t-il, on s'étonne de constater qu'ils conservent un caractère largement privé en dépit du déluge d'informations qu'ils relaient. »

Referring to the daily press in 1846, Søren Kierkegaard wrote: “Here men are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale at the cheapest possible price.” This was 125 years before the *Toronto Sun* began circulation. In Kierkegaard's estimation, the daily press — what today we call “the media” — was the primary instrument by which was manufactured and nurtured something called “the public,” a phantom for which he reserved a special sort of disdain. The public — artificial, anonymous, massive, connected but disengaged — was full of opinion but empty of responsibility, wary of commitment, shy of risk, incapable of real judgment, convinced that everything goes and nothing matters; in a word, demoralized, the opposite of citizens. The problem was not that the media undermined the integrity of the public: the media was the condition for the very possibility of the public, and that, for Kierkegaard, was the problem of *The Present Age*.

We are not willing to go quite this far. We are not sure about the media, but we like the public, or rather the idea of the public, at least theoretically. Democracies are defined by

their publicity: public goods, debated in the public sphere by public citizens, delivered by public servants acting on public authority, publicly accountable. That's the idea, anyway, and it is a very old idea. From its ancient origins through to the present, the Western tradition has twinned the public and the political: politics was defined by engagement in the determination and execution of the public good; and the public sphere was defined by the presence of politics. And, for a long time, the public and political life was understood to be the highest form of life available to most human beings: it was by engaging in politics in the public sphere that we really came into our own. We have come to understand the many liabilities of thinking about life this way — it obscures the intensely political operation of power in the private sphere, and it suggests that those historically relegated to it are somehow less than fully human — but still we cling to the basic idea that a life of public engagement, a political life, is somehow better than a disengaged, private life.

What has happened to public life? What has happened to politics? One answer, provided by Kierkegaard

among several others, is that “the public” happened. That, on the modern scale and under modern conditions, including the existence of mass media, the public as a sphere of engagement and as a type of activity, or even a type of good, gave way to “the public” as a massive corporate body, a great elephant, which, with a bit of cajoling, polling or abuse, could be moved to

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throw its weight temporarily behind one or another essentially private, partial, partisan purpose, but which is incapable of all the things that characterize the citizen — engagement, deliberation, judgment, commitment, risk, action. As opposed to the citizen, for “the public,” politics can only ever be spectacle, intrigue, public relations. Ironically, the very moment the modern public is born is also the moment that public life defined by politics and citizenship takes up its long, slow descent into oblivion.

And it is all the media’s fault.

Wouldn’t it be great if that were true? All we would have to do is turn off our television sets for a month or two and, *voilà*, Athens!

It is, in fact, very difficult to make generalizations about “the media” because, like “the public,” “the media” are a phantom. “The media” are not one thing, but rather a category containing of many different things and practices that are often more unlike than like, especially when it comes to their bearing on the prospects of democratic politics and citizenship.

On perhaps the most basic level, “the media” means those technologies of information and communication that mediate social and political life — not the content and the personnel that produce it but the devices themselves.

And it is not unreasonable to ask how these devices, in their basic properties and their social appropriations, bear on the prospects and practice of engaged citizenship. It has been argued that the printing press is what made the modern public possible yet, as I have suggested, that might not necessarily have been a good thing for civic and political engagement (con-

sider the academic vagabond who, moving from city to city, reads *The Globe and Mail* instead of engaging in the politics of his community). Many critics of the modern era have suggested that technology, including mass communication media, is the modern replacement for politics, insofar as it relieves us of the world and the relationships into which it thrusts us, rather than engaging us with them.

Most of the time, when people talk about “the media,” especially in the context of politics, they are talking about the news media, the journalists who produce political information in the form of published reporting, analysis and commentary, and the venues in which it appears. But even this way of framing the issue ignores too much diversity to allow us to say with any confidence that “the media” can be blamed for civic disengagement. First of all, there is the distinction between really good political journalists and the high-quality venues in which their work appears, and the awful journalists that churn out news content designed primarily to gather audiences for sale to advertisers. There is also an important distinction to be made between public media, whose mandate is the public interest, and corporate media, whose reason for

being is profitable commerce. And, finally, there is the distinction between mainstream and alternative, independent, community-based, non-profit media, and information providers, who operate vigorously across the platforms of print, radio, film documentary, and the internet.

Which of these are “the media”? Given this diversity, it is difficult to say anything very general about “the media” in relation to public service or political engagement. At one pole there are the independent, alternative media, whose existence is basically defined by the struggle to engage and politicize their publics on the issues that matter and, at the

other, the junk commercial media for whom news is ideally indistinguishable from the bites of trivia, kitsch, moral panic, shopping, voyeurism and *schadenfreude* that characterize commodified mass culture more generally. Between these poles sits the serious mainstream media who take their public role seriously and do their best to fulfill it.

A recent study in the *Canadian Journal of Political Science* shows that the majority of Canadian journalists (albeit a declining majority) continue to subscribe to a creed that places a high value on accurate reporting on public figures, timely provision of information, analysis and interpretation of complex public issues, investigation of public controversies, and giving a voice to everyday citizens. Could they do better? Of course they could. They could try harder to avoid portraying political life as a personal, strategic, theatrical encounter between parties and their leaders, punctuated by moments of scandal and heroism, and instead present politics as a daily practice of deliberation, judgment and action on complex public policy issues that develop and persist over time in equally complex and dynamic contexts. They could, for example, try harder to tell us the story of how relationships of class, gender and race

matter more to the daily political experience of most Canadians than does corruption in the Liberal Party.

Still, despite their shortcomings, it would be a stretch to blame serious mainstream news media — the CBC, the intelligent newspapers and magazines — for the purported collapse of the public idea in this country. Because, after all, the good work of decent journalists is really just a tear in a salty sea — a vast sea of commodified information, entertainment, advertising and diversion that consumes our attention via the various screens, pages, and speakers that provide the architecture of modern mass culture. This too is “the media,” and if we are looking for “the media” that we might implicate in the depoliticization of the public, it is probably better to start here than with the news.

There is very little in this broader mediascape to encourage and nurture the sustained love of the public thing

that is a necessary precondition of engaged citizenship. Of all the things that can be said about mobile phones, Blackberries, TV, PlayStation, commercial radio, the iPod, and even many of the Blogs, perhaps the most surprising is how very privatizing they have become, despite the deluge of communication they mediate. These devices privatize by directing our attention inward rather than outward, away from, rather than toward, public life; by extracting us from, rather than placing us in, the world we share immediately with others. These operations are neither universal nor necessary — there is a significant amount of good in the mediascape as well — but the manner in which most people consume most media commodities most of the time is more privatizing than it is publicizing. Phrased differently: the challenge the iPod presents for the property rights of media conglomerates may be

nothing compared to the threat it poses for our experience of public life.

**B**ut even here there is a problem of determination. Is it at all plausible to say that even “the media,” understood in this broader, contextual way, are the *cause* of depoliticization, or would it be better to say that the way we make use of mass media is a *symptom* of the ethic of disengagement occasioned by the deeper structural properties of the way we take up with the world? It is possible, after all, that depoliticization is a necessary and not contingent feature of mass, technological, capitalist society; that it is structural, not ornamental; not a pathology but a vaccine against one; not dysfunctional but functional; not a threat to our “way of life” but its greatest security.

In his influential essay “Technology and Science as Ideology,” Jürgen Habermas argued that a polity



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New information platforms such as iPods and cell phones empower consumers, allowing them to download information and even television programs directly from the Internet. These platforms have also produced a privatizing effect in the media, writes McGill's Darin Barney.

organized around ongoing, massive state support for capital accumulation “requires a depoliticization of the mass of the population,” because the legitimacy of such an arrangement could hardly withstand genuinely democratic political scrutiny. In these days of neo-liberal globalization, “the productivity crisis” and the “innovation agenda,” we are, perhaps more than ever, precisely this sort of polity, the sort that is “structurally dependent on a depoliticized public realm.” In this context, the mass media are not really the source of depoliticization, but rather a means by which “the depoliticization of the masses can be made plausible to them.”

This suggests that the problems of privatization and depoliticization may be anchored deeply in the political economy of contemporary liberal capitalism. Most current concern over the problem of disengagement is predicated on an assumption that the sta-

bility of our polity is somehow at risk without the engagement of its citizens. I would venture the opposite: that the real risk of instability, of meaningful change, arises with the prospect of widespread citizen engagement and genuine politicization of the questions and relationships that matter. When we decry massive political disengagement and withdrawal from public life are we seriously calling for their opposites? Do we really think that our “way of life” — with its grotesque structural economic and social inequalities in the face of obscenely concentrated abundance, its irrational wars and its dependence on industrial and domestic practices that are destroying the planet — could actually withstand the scrutiny of genuine politics undertaken on an ongoing basis by masses of engaged, public-spirited citizens? To believe so would be to hold a particularly low estimation of what people might be capable of accomplishing.

Specifying the relationship between media and public life is a complex task. It cannot begin before we disaggregate the meaningless catch-all term “the media” and take seriously the significant differences it conceals. It also demands that we confront the possibility that a depoliticized public sphere, populated by a disengaged public, is part of the furniture of a capitalist liberal democracy. This is a troubling proposition, for it suggests that the problem of “the media,” “the public” and citizenship runs far deeper than we like to think it does.

*Darin Barney is Canada Research Chair in Technology and Citizenship at McGill University. Adapted from a presentation at the conference “Responsibilities of Citizenship and Public Policy,” organized by the IRPP and the Trudeau Foundation, at Glendon College, November 2005.*



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