

A Cultural Approach to the Study of Mediated Citizenship

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The study of media and politics is dominated by three central but flawed assumptions: that news is the primary and proper sphere of political communication; that the most important function of media is to supply citizens with “information”; and that political “engagement” must necessarily be associated with physical activity. These assumptions are based on an instrumental orientation toward media. This article advances instead a cultural approach to the study of mediated citizenship, one that foregrounds the intimate role that media play in the daily lives of citizens. It argues four primary propositions: that people employ a complex ensemble of media that have extensive reach into our lives as citizens and consumers; that media have differential effects on the meanings that come to constitute political reality; that we must look beyond information acquisition as the primary reason for how and why citizens employ political media, and instead see the integrative aspects of media usage; and that we exist in a culture of mediated engagement with politics that structures our political lives in unprecedented ways. Together, these propositions suggest that scholars need to account for the central role of mediated politics—in all its various manifestations and forms—in the constitution of citizens’ understanding of the state and their relationship to it.

Keywords Citizenship; politics; media; popular culture; political communication; civic engagement

Citizens in Western societies have experienced the explosive growth and diffusion of media technologies and their increasingly central location in our public and private lives. The potential number of places in which we now attend to, even brush up against, various forms of political information, symbols, and narratives are astounding. These engagements with politics are not segregated as separate activities for the duty-bound “good citizen.” Instead, they are interspersed and concomitant with the flow and rhythms of routine activities in daily life.¹ Nor are these engagements necessarily related to the intentional

1. As Todd Gitlin notes, media form “an accompaniment to life that has become a central experience of life” (2002, 17; original emphasis).

acquisition of political information. Instead, these encounters with mediated politics are often related to pedestrian pursuits of pleasure, distraction, curiosity, community, sociability, and even happenstance. And although much attention has been given of late to the potentialities of new media technologies for a revival of democratic participation (Meikle 2002; Rheingold 2002; McCaughey and Ayers 2003; Gillmor 2004), it is this intermixing of old media and new media—taken both individually and as a whole—and the political content that is made available through them that deserves our attention. For it is within this saturated media environment that political culture is shaped and maintained in late-modern society, and hence, an important starting place if we seek to understand media's role in contemporary meanings of citizenship.

Yet despite the changes that have occurred in the mediation between citizen and state, much of the discussion of mediation continues to be focused on the supposed ways in which media negatively affect the political process (specifically) and political culture (in general). What typically motivates such criticisms is the need to account for the decline of traditional measures of democratic vitality in Western societies, such as voting, political party affiliation, political knowledge, trust in leaders, and voluntary activism. The ubiquity of media, its popularity as a central source for popular understanding of politics, and its increasing centrality to the act of governance itself results in media becoming a natural place to look for the “cause” of these “effects.” Robert Putnam's (2000) argument that television is a leading source of civic disengagement is perhaps one of the more popular manifestations of what is known as the “media malaise” thesis. Beyond Putnam, however, are numerous scholarly claims that comprise this thesis, ranging from a focus on media content (such as negativity, conflictual framing, horse race coverage, and tabloidization), to institutional limitations (such as pack journalism and the “miscast institution” of the press), to media's supposed detrimental effects on citizens (such as the illusion of participation, lack of trust in government, amusement and distraction, and cynicism).² And although assessments of new media technologies such as the Internet are often accompanied by claims of democratic revival, there is no shortage of dystopian views that suggest the possible negative effects of new media on the polity, such as fragmented communication, loss of shared experience, personalized information, polarization, and the withering of community (Freie 1998; Sunstein 2002).

Underlying these arguments, however, are three central but flawed assumptions that, despite the inclusion of other foci and approaches to political communication in the past three decades, continue to dominate the study of mediated citizenship. The first is that the most important sphere of political communication occurs in the interactions between politicians/government

2. See Norris (2000, 3–21) for a survey and critique of this thesis.

officials and the news media.³ The Fourth Estate is seen as the central and most legitimate institution in a democracy to keep a check on power, to uncover facts, to seek truth, and to present reality in a fair and unbiased manner. Furthermore, the press maintains a formal and routine relationship to political power, with regularized, institutional-based interactions, including regulatory oversight, office space, supplied content (e.g. press conferences and interviews), and so on. The news media are therefore seen as the most important players in the creation and/or representation of political reality, even leading some scholars to consider it the fourth branch of government (Cook 1998).

To be sure, these functions are vital to successful self-governance. Nevertheless, this persistent focus on news media has weaknesses. It leads to dismissals of other, more popular sources of political information and content as illegitimate (derisively labeled “infotainment” or “soft news”). Entertainment media are seen as distractions from the serious duty of the informed citizen. Yet recent scholarship in America and Europe has demonstrated, to the contrary, that citizens who employ a variety of popular media in their encounters with politics (such as fictional narratives, humorous talk shows, popular music, etc.) actually derive meaningful engagement with the political process (Corner and Pels 2003; Baym 2005; Jones 2005a; van Zoonen 2005). Furthermore, news stories are simply one type of narrative, while entertainment media provide yet another (and indeed, often do a better job in offering complex narratives because storytelling is what the entertainment industry does so well). Thus, it is important to recognize that different media can, and often do, present different narratives about politics. Even narratives within a single medium (say television, for instance) can have great variance, levels of quality, and appeal. Outright dismissals of popular content about politics miss this fact.

Another weakness of the focus on news is that it ignores the citizens or consumers of media themselves. What we now see is that people are, for better or worse, increasingly turning away from news as their primary source of engagement with the political world.⁴ Young people, in particular, utilize other sources of information than broadcast news or print journalism, such as entertainment media and the Internet (Mindich 2005). Both broadcast and print journalism, furthermore, are in a state of crisis in the United States (Kovach and

3. Two prominent examples are found in recent scholarly treatments of the state of political communication. In the *Journal of Communication's* special issue on “the state of the art in communication theory and research,” Doris Graber’s quantitative analysis of political communication research appearing in top discipline journals highlights the continued dominance of news as a central focus of academic research (2005, 483). In Lynda Lee Kaid’s (2004) recent update to the classic *Handbook of Political Communication*, research on news media is the only mass-mediated form of political communication that receives its own section and numerous chapters devoted to it. In short, although European scholars have more actively embraced the “cultural turn” in the study of all forms of communication, including politics, that change has come much more slowly in US scholarship.

4. In 2002, the Pew Research Center reported that audiences for network news, network news magazines programs, CNN, and local news had fallen from 26 percent to 54 percent between 1993 and 2003. See Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Public’s News Habits Little Changed Since September 11” (retrieved 25 September 2005, from <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=156>).

Rosenstiel 2001; Hachten 2005). With declining readership and viewership, the institution is economically challenged by dwindling advertising revenues as well as increased costs of production (Roberts, Kunkle, and Layton 2001; Seelye 2005a). Recent scandals related to professional norms and ethics (from story fabrication by Jayson Blair at the *New York Times* and Stephen Glass at *The New Republic* to poor fact checking on President Bush's Air National Guard records by Dan Rather at *CBS News*) have contributed to a decline in trust with news media consumers (Johnson 2003; Hachten 2005, 102–12). Concurrently, with new media technologies such as blogs and search engine portals, citizens are questioning the top-down, gatekeeper role of news media, and instead increasingly desire a more active role in the determination and construction of what constitutes news and who gets to make it (Gillmor 2004; Seelye 2005b). Finally, the press's timidity in questioning and thwarting overt propaganda efforts by the Bush administration (as both the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* offered *mea culpa* for their lack of serious reporting on assertions and evidence by the Bush administration in the run-up to the Iraq war) also weakens the news media's claim to serving as effective and trustworthy watchdogs to power (Younge 2004; Seelye 2005c). In short, these numerous factors suggest a more urgent need to look to other locations beyond news for citizen engagement with mediated politics.

The second yet related assumption dominating the study of mediated citizenship is that the primary function of media in political communication is the provision of useful political “information.” Michael Schudson's (1998) history of American civic life has demonstrated how a model of citizenship developed in the Progressive Era—that of the “Informed Citizen”—continues to foster the normative expectation that the media's central role or obligation is to provide information that allows citizens to be fully informed on political matters of the day. Only through an informed citizenry, the argument goes, can self-governance be truly realized. The role for mass media in a democracy, then, is to supply citizens with the substantive and thorough information they need to fulfill that role. When media stray from this function—for instance, in the provision of entertaining content—they are decried for subverting the needs of the citizenry. Scholars who criticize the decline of quality journalism contribute to this assumption that citizens are being denied that which they need the most: a certain brand of information about politics deemed more important than others (Scheuer 1999; Bennett 2001).

But is “information” about politics the primary thing that citizens want from media? Or is the supposed benefit of information—knowledge or education about issues, parties, politicians, and legislation—the primary benefit they seek in their interactions with mediated politics? Certainly trustworthy and unbiased information about politics is a necessary and important ingredient of citizenship. Yet scholars of symbolic interactionism and political language have long noted the significant role of political symbols, rituals, myths, metaphors, and other significations in constituting public life (Burke 1966; Barthes 1972; Edelman 1988; Kertzer 1988; Lakoff 1996). As Bruce Gronbeck argues, “Symbolic life is

life—is the world we actually inhabit as collective beings. Politics may shuffle money, votes, territory, and other material entities, but politics *itself* is a symbolic process wherein cultural entities—myths, ideologies, values, attitudes, beliefs—are evoked, rearranged, and ordered in ways that produce political decisions. Politics thus is not *about* symbolic matters but is in essence symbolic” (1990, 212; original emphasis).

Information acquisition is primarily an instrumental approach that the rational citizen employs in certain situations. But the citizen is also just as likely to embrace political material that expresses, reifies, confirms, or celebrates the core beliefs and values he or she connects to the state, or those things that affirm his or her identity as a citizen. For instance, the fact that citizens have made Fox News—with its overt ideological bias, manipulative patriotic displays, spectacle performances by cheerleading pundits, and jingoistic rhetoric—the highest rated cable news show in America suggests that perhaps some of them want or desire more from political communication than just “information.” Similarly, while the documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* was director Michael Moore’s effort to inform citizens of the corruption and vacuousness of the Bush presidency (and, in turn, sway voters’ opinions), the tremendous popularity of the film suggests that the film also served the important communal function of expressing, reifying, and confirming the frustrations of many citizens on the political left who were opposed to the Iraq war and Republican leadership (as well as a providing a similar rallying point for the political right to mobilize against what they considered leftist propaganda) (Jones 2005b).

The third assumption that dominates the study of media and politics is the belief that political engagement is primarily a physical activity first and foremost. As political scientist Norman Nie put it some 30 years ago, “If citizens are home watching television or its future counterpart, they cannot be out participating in politics” (quoted in Peterson 1990, 244). Even the literature on new media and their relationship to politics emphasizes the avenues for direct political action (i.e. mobilization, fundraising, discussion) that can and do occur through these new channels of communication. Yet, what *other* roles exist when we say a citizen “engages” politics? Does media material that leads to significant cognitive activities—say, the development of schemas or mental maps about political reality—actually count as “engagement” *per se* (Kertzer 1988, 77–101; Graber 2001; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Lakoff 2004)? What to make of the building blocks we use for constructing these maps of the political and social world outside our direct experience (or as Kenneth Burke would have it, the “‘clusters’ or ‘equations’ in [a person’s] particular ‘psychic economy’”; Burke 1969, 114)? From where do we obtain the reservoir of images and voices, heroes and villains, sayings and slogans that we draw upon in making sense of politics, and how are they involved in the creation of political “reality”? As George Herbert Mead has argued, “language does not simply symbolize a situation or object which is already there in advance; it makes possible the existence or the appearance of that situation or object, for it is a part of the mechanism whereby that situation or object is created” (quoted in Pranger 1968, 156). An

examination of the variety of media that supply such materials seems fundamental in this regard.

Furthermore, what role for consumption? As our lives are more commonly defined and lived as consumers, and as consumption becomes a central means through which we establish our identities (including its increasingly important influence in social institutions such as the family, religion, and education), how does consumerism affect or structure our engagement with the state (Scammell 2003)? Physical engagement is important, but what of the forces and factors that *precede* political action? Finally, how do the broader aspects of political culture, the activities that influence and shape our self-conceptions as citizens, affect our desires, hopes, fears, and expectations of what political life has to offer?

All three assumptions, then, are based on an instrumental orientation toward media, one that allows rational actors to *use* media to transmit “messages over distance for the purpose of control,” as James Carey most famously described this “transmission view” or transport model of communicative *interaction* (Carey 1989, 15). That is, communicative actions are seen as a means to an end—to persuade, to inform, to learn, and so on. As one survey of the field of political communication summarized, “the field’s center or mainstream continues to be devoted to studying the strategic uses of communication to influence public knowledge, beliefs, and action on political matters and to regard the political campaign as the paradigmatic instance of the subject” (Nimmo and Swanson 1990, 9). These dominating assumptions are the result of just such a transmission view of political communication: that citizens garner information through news media that will in turn influence how they interact with politics behaviorally (i.e. ultimately, how they vote). Hence, political communication is, in essence, a strategic enterprise (for both rhetors and consuming citizens).

As will be discussed later, this is contrasted by a ritual view of communication where individuals engage in communication as a form of social *integration*; that is, communication “not out of self-interest nor for the accumulation of information but from a need for communion, commonality and fraternity” (Holmes 2005, 123). To comprehend the place and role of media in shaping political culture and contemporary citizenship, we would do well to add to the logocentric, instrumental orientation of political communication research a *cultural* approach that can account for the wide variety of mediated relationships—both interactive and integrative—that citizens employ in their engagements with political life.

Unlike instrumental or transmission views, a cultural approach foregrounds the intimate role that media play in our lives—the myriad ways in which media are used and integrated into our daily routines, or what Todd Gitlin calls the “wraparound presence” of media (2002, 10); how this type of usage affects our understandings of and commitments to democracy; how the variety of narratives that comprise different media address needs we have as citizens and consumers; how we understand and make sense of the world through this media plentitude; and how these opportunities for engagement shape our identities as citizens.

This cultural approach is an empirical (rather than normative) undertaking. The intent is to describe the way that citizenship is now partly constituted by and through media, and how such mediation is central to understanding the citizen's relationship to the state. This article, therefore, seeks to chart a different course by offering four propositions that highlight the important role that media play in shaping citizenship. The four propositions are: *media are plural*; *mediums affect meanings*;⁵ *mediation occurs beyond information acquisition*; and *we live in a culture of political engagement*.

Media are Plural

The study of media and politics is still dominated by a monolithic conception of what constitutes “the media”—that is, the news. Almost all leading textbooks in the field maintain this distinction, concentrating their discussions primarily on news media (Alger 1995; McNair 1995; Woodward 1997; Perloff 1998; Purvis 2000; Bennett 2001; Paletz 2002; Jamieson and Waldman 2003). This focus—on what amounts to the institutionalized interaction of *elites* (e.g. politicians and journalists)—is a limited one, and one that may disregard the relationship that many people maintain with the sphere of elite actions. As Murray Edelman contends, “To hear or read the news is to live intermittently in a world one does not touch in daily life; and not to read it ordinarily makes little difference . . . Most experiences that make life joyful, poignant, boring, or worrisome are not part of the news” (1988, 35).

Instead, we should also examine media and politics from the bottom up—that is, from the perspective of those who utilize numerous and multiple forms of media in their interactions with the world of politics. To understand how citizens make sense of political reality, we must first recognize that there is a profusion of media, almost all of which carry some form of political content. Our accountings of how media shape contemporary civic culture should lead us to examine traditional (or old) media, new media, and alternative media *as a whole*. Not only should we study television, radio, film, and print media (newspapers, magazines, books, newsletters), but also their concurrent existence alongside new media (cell phones, websites, discussion boards, email, blogs and vlogs), alternative media,⁶ fax machines, music, comics, direct mail, videotapes and DVDs, satellite transmissions, photocopies, billboards, and so on (Ganley 1992). For it is this intermixing of media forms that most closely

5. Throughout this article, the term “medium” (as developed and employed by media ecologists and proponents of medium theory) is used to highlight Marshall McLuhan's conception that “media technologies carry distinct temporal and spatial specificities to which correspond definite frameworks of perception” (Holmes 2005, 39). The usage of differing communication mediums, then, will have differential effects on citizens' relationship to the political world.

6. Because “alternative media” is a term used to represent a wide variety of politically conscious, non-mainstream media forms, Couldry and Curran use the term to refer to “media production that challenges, at least implicitly, actual concentrations of media power, whatever form those concentrations may take in different locations” (2003, 7).

approximates the way in which citizens employ communication technologies in their daily lives.

Even within one media form, we should examine the sheer variety of political engagement that occurs. Radio, for instance, connects citizens to the political world through talk radio, public radio, commercial music stations, Christian radio, satellite radio, low-power FM, pirate or rebel radio, and short-wave radio (such as the right-wing Patriot movement broadcasts in the United States) (Hilliard and Keith, 1999). Determining the specific types of radio that citizens choose from (as well as their frequency of usage) is fundamentally important to understanding *how* citizens employ radio in their engagements with politics. Similarly, when we discuss “the press,” we must recognize the enormous range of sources that are included in that designation. Although many citizens read the newspaper, either a national or local daily, many also have the opportunity to engage with politics via suburban and alternative weeklies, the alternative press (black, gay, ethnic), magazines (ideological and general interest), or even the international press and newswires (available online). And within a particular press organ, the types of political material available can vary widely, from reportage and opinion-editorials to letters to the editor, cartoons, and photographs.

Some discussions of media and politics certainly account for this variety of form and content (Bucy and Gregson 2002; Moy and Pfau 2000; Nimmo and Combs 1983). But if we are to take a bottom-up approach in understanding mediated citizenship, the recognition of this great variety of political content should direct our attention to what audiences derive from these multiple forms—what mix of serious and humorous, ideological and non-partisan, informative and mythological, local and national, mainstream and marginal they consume, and why. It should lead us to see the complexity of preferences audiences display for certain types of political material, and what type of sources they find valuable, trustworthy, or pleasurable. Moreover, citizens have unequal or differential access to such media, and as such often utilize that which is most easily or cheaply at their disposal. We thus should focus on the detailed political constitution of what some scholars call our “media ensemble,” the particular assemblage of media routinely employed that, in this instance, structures our primary engagements with politics in media (Bausinger 1984).

The conservative movement in the United States, for instance, has recognized the power inherent in employing a variety of media forms to project the movement’s message and extend its penetration by enveloping audiences in a consistent message that reverberates across media channels. Conservative activist and direct mail fundraiser Richard Viguerie, with David Franke, recently documented the movement’s success in this regard in their book, *America’s Right Turn: How Conservatives Used New and Alternative Media to Take Power* (Viguerie and Franke 2004). Viguerie and Franke speak openly about the ways in which conservatives have intentionally employed talk radio, cable television, newsletters, advertising, magazines, books, direct mail, faxes, and the Internet

to create a movement that now controls every branch of government at the federal level in the United States.

A separate study of Christian right media also shows how evangelicals have used AM radio stations, cable and local television access channels, news services, think tanks, bookstores, the postal service, telephone lines, and the Internet to disseminate their messages linking Christian beliefs to direct political action, mobilization, and fundraising. Through the process of “recycling,” Christian media operatives realize that a particular story serves “multiple needs, media formats, and potential listener/viewerships,” and therefore they exploit every channel available for saturated coverage (Lesage 1998, 27). Lest one think that these studies only describe top-down communication strategies of a well-funded and highly coordinated ideological movement, Hilliard and Keith offer evidence of similar usage of disparate media forms (such as “mail-order book services, computer bulletin boards, gun shows, Bible camps, pamphlets, periodicals, and short-wave radio broadcasts”) by widely dispersed users at the grassroots level of the radical right (1999, 89). In short, what these three studies illuminate is how conservatives and right-wing radicals have recognized the great panoply of media forms that citizens employ in their daily lives and have, in turn, exploited these consumptive habits and relationships with media in their reach for political power.

These studies, therefore, should be extended beyond partisan and religious formations to examine how citizens uncommitted to such defined ideological perspectives employ a similar array of media forms through their own patterns of media consumption. In the area of television studies, scholars have examined television in everyday life (Silverstone 1994; Gauntlett and Hill 1999; Lembo 2000); but in regards to analyses of political content in media, we have not looked across media forms with much regularity to consider the interplay of everyday life and political consumption.⁷ In a single given day, a citizen might engage in all of the following activities that offer a mediated relationship to the conventional political arena through differing texts about politics: read a newspaper in the morning over breakfast, watch a morning news show while getting dressed, listen to talk radio in the car while driving to work, read politically charged emails, scan a news magazine in the office lobby, hear a political protest song in the car, see a political advertisement on a billboard on the way home, watch a political drama on DVD during the evening hours, then turn to a satirical faux television news show while getting ready for bed, only to retire for the evening by reading a political biography. An examination of the interplay between these activities will probably illuminate how this complex intermixing of media affects average citizen understandings of and relationship to politics. Why does this matter? Because, as the next proposition argues, each form of media contains different narratives about politics, and as such, provide different meanings to be used in the construction of political reality by citizens.

7. See Shaun Moores (2000) for an examination of the integration of various media forms into everyday life.

Mediums Affect Meanings

Just as political content is available through multiple and varied media technologies, the particular narratives found there offer a range of interpretations of the political world. Why this is so, of course, has to do with differences in the political economy of production and distribution, standardized or popularized narrative conventions and form, authorship, audience expectations, and numerous other factors that media scholars routinely discuss. But as medium theory would also have us understand, important distinctions exist between media because of qualities resident in the mediums themselves.

Joshua Meyrowitz argues that three central metaphors shape how we should view communication mediums—medium as vessel or conduit, medium as language or grammar, and medium as environment. First, to view the medium as vessel, we study the content of media and the effects that derive from that content. Applying this to mediated politics on television, for instance, we note that the medium carries a variety of content related to politics. News, as noted earlier, is the most obvious, but other varieties include pundit talk shows (*Crossfire*), humorous talk shows (*The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*), documentaries (*Frontline*), fictional dramas (*The West Wing*), sitcoms (*Spin City*), political satire (*Saturday Night Live*), and video feeds (C-SPAN). The resulting narratives about politics that each of these forms provide can produce significant variation in meanings about political reality (even within the same medium and genre). One study, for instance, compared the narratives about the Bill Clinton–Monica Lewinsky scandal constructed on a pundit television talk show (*This Week*) with those formulated on a humorous talk show (*Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*). It found that the discussants arrived at very different conclusions about the scandal and what should be done about it—outcomes that were structured (although not determined) by the show’s format, the compositional variety of participants in the discussions, and the means of sense-making employed by those participants (Jones 2005a, 141–57).

Another study compared the narratives formulated by a satirical, fake news program (*The Daily Show*) with those created by a real news show (CNN), both covering the same campaign events in the 2004 US presidential election. Although both shows imparted information about the campaign, the overall interpretive meaning offered to the viewer differed greatly—not because one was “objective” and the other satirical (or subjective), but largely because of the types of campaign imagery and rhetoric that the programs focused on and interrogated, even though both programs aired clips from the same event, and therefore had similar content (Jones 2006). In short, not only do different media encode political reality in different ways, but the narrative content that comprises even a single medium such as television (or genres within it) can lead to quite different understandings of politics for citizens. A cultural approach to mediated citizenship emphasizes the need to investigate these various forms of political content.

Second, when examining media based upon its language or grammar (such as its visual or aural qualities, its type fonts or size, its usage of dissolves, zooms, or angles, etc.), we recognize that the rudimentary features comprising how a medium “speaks” also affect the ways in which the medium constructs or leads the user to “make sense” of a particular reality. Differences in a medium’s grammar result in different types of “perception, comprehension, emotional reaction, and behavioral responses” in audiences (Meyrowitz 1999). Students of political communication have long recognized that audience interpretations of a politician’s performance can be quite different when experienced, for instance, on radio rather than television (with the 1960 Kennedy–Nixon debate as one of the most famous in this regard). More recently, Donnalyn Pompper (2003) has examined the narratives of *The West Wing*—and argues that the dramatic television form is better suited for offering viewers certain insights into the executive branch than is news. Viewers, she maintains, develop a stronger connection to politics via dramatic narratives because they assume a subjective positioning, seeing into the motivations and desires, frailties and faults of the characters involved in political decision-making. Hence, the particular dramatic grammar of television (i.e. lightening, close-ups, point-of-view shots, music, etc.) formulates narratives that engage the viewing public in ways that journalism most often does not. Liesbet van Zoonen offers data on audiences for *The West Wing* that corroborates Pompper’s arguments. She concludes that popular or entertainment-based representations of politics have a particular appeal for viewers, affecting how they judge political performance and political processes beyond the television environment (van Zoonen 2005, 123–41).

Third, by examining the medium as environment, we foreground the differing relationships that people maintain in their interactions with a medium and the particular biases resident in its technological features. As Meyrowitz argues, this includes “the type of sensory information the medium can and cannot transmit; the speed and degree of immediacy of communication; unidirectional vs. bi-directional vs. multidirectional communication; simultaneous or sequential interaction; the physical requirements for using the medium; and the relative ease or difficulty of learning to use the medium to code or decode messages” (1999). A citizen’s act of expressing a political opinion via a letter to the editor of the local newspaper versus his/her entering a political chat room on the Internet to do the same thing are very different means of political participation, largely structured by the media he/she has chosen to employ. Both the newspaper and the Internet allow for participation, yet each environment differs in how that interaction will proceed because of factors such as regulated/unregulated access to publication, timing/temporality of the participatory act, continuous and open feedback from other readers, length and space limitations, and so on. Similarly, the political messages included in the lyrics of a popular song will be received and interpreted in quite different fashion to the latest “kiss-and-tell” book by a former government official. The former has greater potential to engage the listener’s affective and pathos-centered desires, whereas the latter is more likely to appeal to his or her rational and logos-centered sensibilities (although for

different people this may not always be the case). In other words, music and print are not just different in their grammatical make-up, but also in the way the medium itself engages the user.⁸

Another example of media as environment is how a citizen can make sense of the Enron scandal from a documentary film versus reports on television news as the scandal is unfolding. A film such as *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), using interviews, news clips, and graphics, lays out the contours and intricacies of the scandal in 109 minutes. It establishes the narrative of good guys and bad guys, and in the process transforms a set of complex financial dealings into a “story” of human fallibility. While the overall narrative imparted by a film and a television news report might be similar, the medium through which the story is told nevertheless affects the overall message and audience’s interpretive experience. From the documentary’s sequential storytelling, length, temporal appearance, and muckraking conventions to the audience’s cost in attending, focused attention, and expectations of documentary form—each contributes to the medium’s particular interpretive effects (Nichols 1991, 3–31).

In sum, medium theory directs our attention to the fact that the medium does matter in how politics is communicated. As James Carey argues,

The exploitation of a particular communications technology fixes particular sensory relations in members of society. By fixing such a relation, it determines a society’s world view; that is, it stipulates a characteristic way of organizing experience. It thus determines the forms of knowledge, the structure of perception, and the sensory equipment attuned to absorb reality. (quoted in Holmes 2005, 39)

The “sense” that citizens therefore make of political communication is partially structured by the medium itself. And it is not just the variety of political content that matters, but also the means through which that content is received. With the numerous types of communication technologies available to citizens today, the meanings of politics at any given time are wide-ranging and unstable.

Mediation Occurs Beyond Information Acquisition

As noted, the traditional focus of political communication on news media has also tended to emphasize the importance of “information” as the central component of mediated citizenship. But as proponents of the ritual view of communication argue, there are many reasons why citizens engage in communicative acts that are either unrelated or tangential to the desire to be informed. Ritual acts of communication facilitate a sense of identification, community/sociability, security/control, expression, pleasure/entertainment, distraction, and even possession. A cultural approach to mediated citizenship foregrounds

8. For a discussion of the epistemology of oral, written, and electronic forms of communication, see Ong (1982). For an application of such thinking to television, see Postman (1985).

the ways in which citizens utilize media for these ends, as well as how certain media facilitate these feelings or behaviors more than others.

Public access television, for instance, is almost meaningless if one views it as a significant source for political information that extends beyond the ideological status quo of two-party rule in the United States (primarily because of its structural and financial limitations in most cities). But for the citizens who produce such programming, one study reports, it offers a feeling of empowerment, a sense that they do indeed “own” the airwaves in some fashion, and that they have a measure of control over television programming, however minimal (Linder 1999). Similarly, those who engage in the practice of “culture jamming”—where the ideology of capitalism is interrupted and subverted through the manipulation of advertising codes and symbols—are probably not changing anyone’s mind about whether they should drink Absolut vodka or purchase Nike shoes. Culture jammers are, however, staking a claim that they too have the right to possess and control their cultural environment, even as they violate property or trademark law in the process (Branwyn 1997; Harold 2004).

A study of the “shadow campaign” occurring in popular culture during the 2004 US presidential election also highlights the functions of popular media forms (such as films, music, television and radio programs, books, etc.) beyond the instrumental intentionality of those who produced the material. The vast array of overtly political documentary films originating on the political left and right during the campaign, for instance, exemplifies how the films served as more than just rhetorical arguments of support for or detraction from the political candidates. These films also had the effect of provoking dialog, offering different ways of thinking about the candidates and the world, advancing additional issues not raised by the campaigns, and providing a means through which viewers could establish a sense of belonging and/or connections to the community of other concerned, frustrated or partisan citizens (Jones, 2005b).

In this way, then, a ritual view of communication focuses our attention on the important integrative aspects of media. As numerous studies have demonstrated, media remind citizens of their place in a community, nation, or society. Media serve as “priests” in offering civil religious “sacraments” during times of conflict, trouble, or mourning (Hallin and Gitlin 1992; Dayan and Katz 1992; Marvin and Ingle 1999). It alerts citizens when core values are threatened, and notifies them when they should rise up like patriots to defend those values (Thelen 1996). It offers a rich symbolic universe that, perhaps more often than not, taps into affective feelings, emotions, and beliefs having more political resonance with citizens than logic-centered appeals (Comstock and Scharrer 2005).

Finally, citizen desire for entertainment, pleasure, and distraction when attending to media are accounted for in a cultural approach as well. Engaging politics through media need not be the proverbial equivalent of eating one’s vegetables. With a dramatic increase in new forms of entertainment-centered programming on television that deals with the formal political arena, audiences are offered many different formats—some more pleasurable than others—for

consuming political narratives. One study of audiences for humorous political talk shows on television, for instance, reports that audiences watch precisely because it informs *while* offering feelings of enjoyment or pleasure not available on traditional, pundit-based talk shows (Jones 2005a).

Recent scholarly work, particularly in Europe, has begun to explore the relationship that exists between the types of affective politics I am describing here and the more rationalistic conceptions of citizenship that continue to dominate the study of political communication. John Corner and Dick Pels argue that the aesthetics of political representation have changed, with voters more attuned to notions of celebrity and style in their judgments of politicians and their character. The visual and emotional literacy that is the basis of these judgments arises from what they call the “post-ideological lifestyle choices” derived from consumerism, celebrity, and entertainment (Corner and Pels 2003, 7). The ways that politicians therefore use media to exploit this, or the types of media used by citizens as they attend to politics in these ways, becomes increasingly significant. Hence, both affective appeals and affective voter assessments become incorporated into what is often conceived as a realm of political activity that should be dominated by rational thought and action.

We Live in a Culture of Political Engagement

A cultural approach to understanding mediated citizenship foregrounds the relationships that citizens maintain with the enormous array of media forms available to them. This emphasis on mediation, therefore, recognizes that daily citizen engagement with politics is more frequently *textual* than organizational or “participatory” in any traditional sense. That is, the most common and frequent form of political activity comes, for most people, through their choosing, attending to, processing, and engaging myriad media texts about the formal political process of government and political institutions as they conduct their daily lives.⁹ As discussed earlier, those engagements may be instrumental in nature—intentional encounters, segregated from other activities, focused on the attainment of information, perhaps even ideologically derived or centered. Conversely, those engagements may be cursory and haphazard, enmeshed in daily routines, associated with pursuits of pleasure, and existing far afield from ideological or partisan concerns. They may derive from the rational pursuit of self-interest, the need for social integration, or both. In either case, media provide the central means for citizens’ understanding of and connection to the political world.

9. Gronbeck makes a similar argument when he asserts that it is the task of political communication scholars to understand how politics is partly the negotiation over meaning making “wherein political subjects do battle with their leaders via texts and intertextual associations for control of the political environment” (1990, 212).

And that is the point. Politics today is as ubiquitous as advertising. It just as likely comes into our lives uninvited as otherwise. We engage politics everywhere, all the time, and media are central to that engagement. Some of it grabs our attention and some of it does not. Some of it sticks and some of it does not. If a technological device can communicate with people, we can be assured that politicians are going to communicate to citizens through it. But citizens themselves are also going to try to make sense of and participate in the political world through those devices as well. Email is a case in point. Somehow the gods of solicitation learn our virtual whereabouts, and, before we know it, appeals for our beliefs, money, commitments, and efforts are on our screen. But so are the random, yet frequent mailings from friends and colleagues that appeal to other aspects of our citizenship. They are angry or hopeful missives on contemporary political affairs. They are file attachments offering hilarious renderings of politicians and their foibles in Photoshop political art. They are links to video clips of political parody that we ourselves feel the need to send to others.

We must recognize, therefore, that our political culture has changed as well, a culture in which everyday life and politics are now intimately intertwined *because* of media. Political culture is, by one definition, “the realms of experience, imagination, values and dispositions that provide the settings within which a political system operates, shaping the character of political processes and political behaviour. It is the elements of political culture that, among other things, interconnect the ‘official’ world of professional politics with the world of everyday experience and with the modes of ‘the popular’ variously to be found within work and leisure” (Corner and Pels 2003, 3). A cultural approach foregrounds the ways in which popular media shape public experiences with and dispositions toward politics, including our civic values and democratic imaginations.¹⁰ To do so is to recognize that this shaping occurs through many different media forms (beyond news) that offer a variety of meanings, each with the potential for multiple means of individual and communal interaction (beyond information acquisition).

What political engagement means, therefore, has changed as well (beyond voting and institution-based activities). A cultural approach to citizenship emphasizes the mediated nature of that engagement. It highlights the agency of direct political action available to citizens *through* media (as emphasized in the literature on new media and alternative media, yet also seen in the earlier examples regarding conservative and Christian usage of multiple media forms for political engagement). But it also recognizes the continued importance of political messages and symbolizations that citizens routinely use to make sense of politics in older, still-dominant forms of media (as emphasized in the literature on mass media, political psychology, and rhetorical studies). As Marc Howard Ross explains, a “cultural analysis of politics takes seriously the post-modern

10. See Dahlgren (2000) for a discussion of what he calls our “civic culture,” or the “cultural attributes prevalent among citizens that can in various ways facilitate democratic life.” See Jones for an application of the concept of civic culture to the medium of television (2005a, 187–96).

critique of behavioral political analyses and seeks to offer contextually rich inter-subjective accounts of politics which emphasize how political actors understand social and political actions” (2000, 33). In short, a focus on the mediation of contemporary citizenship highlights the ontological and epistemological dimensions of our mediated public lives.

This does not mean, however, that this culture of engagement necessarily provides a means of overcoming the structured differences in power, access, and legitimacy that certain institutions, voices, and discourses occupy in society. Political economists will rightly point out that mediated citizenship is dominated by large media conglomerates. Access to, representation in, and diversity of media are, and will continue to be, structured by relations of inequality (Golding and Murdock 1999, 159). Whether the blossoming of new media technologies will provide citizens with powerful countervailing means of communication efficacy is yet to be seen. Similarly, official voices and discourses will continue to find their way into newer or more popular forms of communication, as witnessed, for instance, by the Bush administration’s attempts in 2001–2002 to use popular media forms (such as prime-time television dramas, MTV, and reality programming) as a way to sell its “War on Terror” to citizens through non-traditional channels of political communication (Jones 2005a, 6–7).

Nevertheless, as this argument has attempted to demonstrate, the multiple and varied means of cultural production and dissemination now available to citizens through new, alternative, and popular media—as well as traditional media forms—opens avenues for engagement that cannot be totally dominated or determined by the interests of capital or state (if only, at least, in the open, interpretive nature of popular narratives themselves). And as I have also argued, central to contemporary culture is the “lived with” nature of media and its dominant (and dominating) presence in our lives. Perhaps this torrent of media images and messages will blind citizens to the important locations of power and governmental action that ultimately shape their lives. What we can conclude, however, is that the means through which citizens construct the “reality” of politics and the state—and their relationship to it—will be influenced greatly by their daily, routinized engagements with the multiple media forms at their disposal.

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