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Reviving Democracy through New and Traditional Media

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Peter Dahlgren, Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication and Democracy (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). 232 pp. \$24.99 (paper), ISBN: 9780521527897.

Even though the 2008 presidential election mobilized the highest turnout in 40 years, with traditionally excluded and apathetic citizens, such as youth, voting in record numbers (Thee-Brenan 2008), U.S. citizens have long been discontented with their political leaders, estranged from civic institutions, and distrustful of the news media (Weeks 2000). Americans continue to be disconnected from their government and do not believe that government represents their best interests. To counter this trend, during the 2008 presidential election, candidates supported the AmericaSpeaks blueprint for engaging citizens in national policy making using the electronic town hall meeting model (AmericaSpeaks 2004; Fung

2007). The Barack Obama administration supports the use of technologies such as Facebook, e-mail, and text messaging as a means of sustaining and transforming citizen electoral involvement and including citizens in the administrative decision-making process (Rutenberg and Nagourney 2009).

Because of these trends, *Media and Political Engagement* is a timely book addressing the media's role in political engagement and disengagement during a "disturbing" (6) era of democracy. Peter Dahlgren argues that the media have the potential to cultivate civic agency, framed within the context of "civic cultures," despite the shortcomings of traditional media, including television.

Dahlgren sets the stage for his argument as he acknowledges that deeper engagement is needed for a healthy democracy, but recognizes that "social,

cultural, and technological conditions for democracy are in transition” (14), and these changes necessitate finding new ways to incorporate and communicate democratic values in order to engage citizens and resuscitate democracy. By focusing on alternative politics, Dahlgren suggests that citizens continue to be engaged, if not in a collective manner, then with a stronger emphasis on single issues through the use of different media, including the Internet. However, it should be noted that although the author makes a convincing and logical argument, no data, qualitative or quantitative, are provided to support these assertions.

Using the central characteristics of the media system, or the “media matrix,” the author proceeds to discuss media alterations—that is, how the social, cultural, and technological processes that shape democracy are intensified by the media and influence civic engagement and political communication. As Dahlgren’s definition of a matrix states “an arrangement of number, figure, or signs” (54), the reader is set up to expect a visual of this interesting and sophisticated theoretical approach to a problem, but is led astray. Dahlgren continues to support his main assertion by stating that traditional forms of media have been transformed to adapt to what he calls the “media logic,” that is, “the imperatives that shape the particular attributes and ways of doing things within given media” (52). For example, as a result of the increased power of the media over political elites, the media are not successful in political communication; thus, the fundamental role of the media—connecting citizens to political life—fails.

Through the introduction of new media, however, there has been a change in the media logic and a marginalization of traditional forms of media such as print and television. As a consequence, the center of gravity of political communication is shifting. In regard to this point, Dahlgren indirectly acknowledges the digital divide and accepts it as a matter of fact; he is not overly optimistic or naive about the possibility of new media in resolving this issue. The understanding of such a shift, and its potential, is critical to public administration scholars and practitioners as they seek to increase transparency and communicate information to involve citizens in the decision-making process.

However, as Dahlgren clearly communicates, the involvement of citizens entails civic agency—the “enactment of citizenship” (59). Central to Dahlgren’s claim is that the media should provide information for citizens to interact and deliberate within the public sphere of civil society so that they can “do” citizenship. Dahlgren integrates civic agency into a larger civic cultures analytical framework in order to emphasize the role of the media in shaping

engagement and participation through the use of cultural theory. The framework consists of six dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices, and identities. Absent a schematic visual, each dimension is examined individually in terms of its unique contribution to citizen engagement and participation and the role of the media. The author also emphasizes their interconnectedness.

The author proceeds to provide cases exemplifying the application of a civics culture framework in different areas, including television, popular culture, journalism, and the media in the European Union. Dahlgren presents examples, not directly linked to politics, to emphasize how skills, values, trust, practice, and skills, developed through the media, even outside direct political communication, have relevance in democracy, engagement, and citizenship. For example, in the case of television and popular culture, Dahlgren clearly delineates how each of the civic cultures dimensions is linked to politics (145–48). In doing so, he highlights his main claim about how traditional media forums, such as television, have the potential to engage citizens. On the other hand, the author looks at the development of new information communication technologies such as the Internet and how they are changing civic cultures—that is, our lived experiences and tools for social agency—thus placing the Internet at the forefront of media development and in a key position for transforming democracy and citizen engagement. The author ends by underscoring the significance of youth in the future of democracy.

Although Dahlgren does not draw a clear conclusion, it is not his intent to do so. Instead, he provides the reader with a set of constructs to consider when making decisions regarding engagement in society. For the public administrator, this book is essential when considering one’s role in facilitating a democratic society. It provides a framework not only when developing general policy on involving citizens in administrative decision making, but also when using new and traditional media, where the consideration of youth, often lacking in the decision-making process, is posed as a critical element to democratic revival.

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