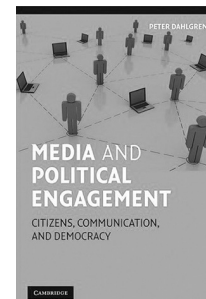


DAHLGREN, P. *Media and political engagement: citizens, communication, and democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. 232 p. ISBN: 978 0 521 52789 7

BY VIKTORIJA CAR

Assistant Professor at the University of Zagreb, Faculty of Political Science, Croatia



A new way to achieve public political engagement without blaming the media

Peter Dahlgren's *Media and political engagement: citizens, communication, and democracy* is definitely not a kind of self-help book giving a list of tips on how politicians should use the media or how the media can help citizens to become more politically engaged. Rather than giving the answers, the author actually poses many new questions.

Peter Dahlgren is professor emeritus of Media and Communication Studies at Lund University in Sweden. Much of his work pivots around notions of the media and communication, the public sphere and democratic nature of late modern society. He is author or editor of a respectable number of books, including *Television and the Public Sphere* (1995), *Television Across Europe* (2000), *Young Citizens and New Media: Learning for Democratic Participation* (2007) and *Young People, ICTs and Democracy* (2010), and, for sure, one of the most cited authors in the field of media and communication.

The first decade of the twenty-first century is widely held to be the most challenging for media development. The rise of the internet, and its communicational dimension, has changed the pre-existing one-way media information flow and the nature of political engagement. The development of online media has definitely changed the dynamics of how citizens use the media to advance the democratic project and the possibilities for larger media-driven social and political engagement on the part of citizens. This book questions the media's ambivalent relationship to citizenship and democracy and addresses political engagement and disengagement and the media's role in this regard, as situated within the tension between the ideals and present realities of democracy.

The book opens with an introductory chapter and afterwards is divided into 8 sections. The first chapter, *Democracy in Difficult Times*, is an overview of the factors contributing to the contemporary difficulties of democracy, emphasizing the specific problems of declines in political participation or engagement. John Keane (2009) agrees that democracy is

about far more than periodic elections; but while he celebrates the 'monitory democracy' and the power of citizens, Dahlgren stresses that long-term trends in Western democracies show declines in voter turnout, party loyalty and trust in government (p. 12), accompanied by citizens, especially younger ones, consistently being berated for their lack of civic responsibility, inadequate levels of political knowledge and unwillingness to get involved in current affairs.

There are many reasons why citizens choose not to engage in politics. According to Dahlgren, it is everyday economic realities in their more drastic forms that can inhibit democratic participation in direct and material ways: unemployment, economic insecurity, low wages, declining social services, growing class rifts and ecological threats. In the era of neoliberal global capitalism, the traditional tensions between market logics and democratic principles become more acute. The governments of nation-states have less manoeuvrability; real societal power drifts increasingly to the private corporate sector and thereby real societal power resides beyond democratic accountability. In turn, the formal political arena has become constricted, offering fewer opportunities for meaningful participation and thereby engendering disengagement.

The second chapter, entitled *Media Alterations*, opens a discussion about media and democracy from the point of the role of the media in the public sphere. Journalism is traditionally seen as contributing to defining the public agenda and offering public means to provide citizens with information, ideas and debates about current affairs, which help facilitate informed opinion and participation in democratic politics (see more in Schudson, 2008). However, this traditional journalism has reached a historical turning point as, on a global level, there is massive growth in media outlets, the intensifying of conglomerate structures in media industries and the increasing globalization of media organizations, practices and flows. Dahlgren sees audience evolution as a central element in the changing conditions of journalism (p. 44). The distinction between 'informed elites' and 'entertained majorities' is on the increase, supported not least by media economics, as access to deeper

information and knowledge beyond the popular media becomes more a significant economic factor. Yet it should be emphasized that access to news does not in itself promote participation. This is because many citizens perceive as too remote the possibility of making some meaningful political connection to the prevailing forms of democracy.

In the third chapter, *Citizens and Agency*, the author presents the idea of citizenship not only as a formal, legal set of rights and obligations but also treats it as a mode of social enactment; in other words, as civic agency. Civic identities emerge through experiences in both the public and private spheres of life. According to Dahlgren, the emergence of civic identity and civic agency prepare the way for the interrogation of democratic involvement as it becomes realized in terms of engagement, participation and motivation. These are the topics the author explores and argues in the next, central chapter, *Engagement, Deliberation, and Performance*. Engagement, as subjective involvement, can be seen as a prerequisite, a starting point for participation which, in turn, usually takes communicative forms (p. 80-81). In democratic participation, voting is just one mode while deliberation is heralded as the fundamental way for citizens to participate in democracy. Moreover, deliberation, in its formal guise, is highly related to specific situations, notably when decisions are about to be made. The concept of deliberative rationality and its problematic assumptions about equal footing in regard to social power and communicative competence limit its usefulness as a model for general civic participation. Instead, Dahlgren proposes that we treat civic talk in a broader manner, allowing for how political topics may even unexpectedly emerge in everyday conversation and how initially private topics can move to the public, political realm. He therefore develops an analytic framework to help analyze and understand civic identities in Chapter 5, *Civic Cultures: An Analytic Frame*. His model of civic cultures comprises six dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices and identities. The model is normative in the sense that it suggests these features need to be present for participation to emerge and for democracy to function.

How television's media logics, especially visuals, invite engagement through pleasure and how this has set up a force field within television news is examined by, the next chapter, *Television and Popular Public Spheres*. Through its popular programming, television offers many opportunities for audiences to 'work through' a vast array of issues in regard to basic values and social visions in many areas. Dahlgren stresses that, at a fundamental level, what is at stake in the public sphere perspective is the question of where the political resides, where social conflict is articulated and processed and how it is positioned against that which is deemed non-political. While popular television can hardly be described as a source for progressive social inspiration and ideological boundaries are seldom clearly ruptured, over time one can see important shifts taking place in popular perceptions.

Unlike Hassan (2004: 100), who criticizes the ICT revolu-

tion, in the last two chapters of this book Dahlgren claims that the new ICTs are contributing to a reconfiguration of political life, though it is still unclear if this will be sufficient to reconstruct democracy. These developments signal altered modes of participation and newer notions of what constitutes politics and the political. However, the internet does not offer a 'speedy technological cure to the ills of democracy' (p. 152). At the same time, it has contributed dramatically to how political communication gets done, as well as to the ways in which participation can take place. Dahlgren charts some of the uses and implications of the internet in three illustrative contexts: journalism, EU NGOs, and the alter-globalization movement. Analytically, the internet, and the media generally, not only play a decisive role in shaping participation but also, from the perspective of civic cultures, offer empirical starting points for illuminating the civic dynamics of democracy.

One of the distinctive traits of this book is the fact it treats citizenship as a strategic concept that is central to an analysis of the media, identity and difference, participation and engagement, empowerment and the public interest. It offers a convincing and original model of civic culture, articulating the multiple cultural and social roots of political participation. Even though a reader may see this book as an abstract theory of media, it presents an excellent view of the role of media in the complex process of political engagement. It helps, both analytically and empirically, to study the factors that can shape civic agency, a concept of citizenship which Peter Dahlgren defines not only as a formal, legal set of rights and obligations but also as a mode of social enactment. This book thereby helps to study the impacts on citizen engagement and participation in democracy.

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