
Are we active citizens who make our own history or are we simply passive consumers, making choices based on our hyper-individualized needs? Despite rhetorical promises that the information society would facilitate a more engaged democracy, we are actually seeing a decline in public participation, particularly among youth, as agency is increasingly expressed within the privatized sphere of consumption. While there are several reasons for this decline in civic engagement, in Citizens or Consumers? What the Media Tell Us about Political Participation, Justin Lewis, Sanna Inthorn, and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen focus on the ideological logic of neoliberalism. In particular, they study the increased privatization of news, and its direct impact on the public sphere. By so doing, several questions are raised about the forces behind the way the media produces consumers, as opposed to active citizens who are politically engaged in public affairs.

The authors of this important book have drawn their rich empirical data from 5,658 news stories that were published in Britain and in the United States. Through their analysis, the Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen document how the news media characterizes and represents citizens. Their basic contention is that journalists facilitate the production of passive spectators, ultimately dissuading people from participating in broader political debates. As a result, the everyday reporting practices of the news media are brought under close scrutiny to discern why it appears that the active force citizens could be playing within their respective democracies is seemingly being curtailed. In short, the book presents a “comprehensive analysis of the role citizens play—for better or worse—in the main British and the US news” (p. 14). The authors thus examine how the media represents citizens as consumers, and, the debilitating impact it has on the average person’s ability to signify within a meaningful public forum as an active agent of social and political change.

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Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen begin by examining the different conduits used to represent citizens in the news—such as public opinion polls or *vox populi*—and follow through by asking how the average citizen is regularly engaged by the media. Their results are profound, concluding that substantive forms of civic engagement such as citizens who are protesting, or who are actively trying to put forward policy proposals and thereby contribute to public debate, are almost always excluded. Instead, the media tend to portray the majority of citizens as being somewhat ‘infantile’ and hence incapable of having a meaningful political opinion. According to their statistics, over 90 percent of references made about citizens in the US and the British news can be characterized as being neither political nor ideological. The *vox populi* is thus used to interview people who respond emotionally and uncritically to the world around them. In this sense, the general public are never given a meaningful chance to set the public agenda and are almost always uniquely portrayed when they are speaking about personal experiences or affective reactions to the decisions of politicians. Moreover, when their political voices are actually represented, the media often stereotypically characterize citizens as being almost uniformly conservative in orientation.

One of the most substantive contributions this book makes is in how the authors have drawn the media’s social role into sharp focus. Serious questions need to be asked when a simple inference to a public opinion poll—especially one made about an unknown and unsubstantiated source—stands as the most common reference to citizenry in the American and British news media. Such inferences do not capture any real evidence about public opinion but rather create the illusion that citizenship matters. Or does it? From the authors’ perspective it would appear that it does not. The only meaningful site of civic empowerment, particularly within a post 9/11 political climate, is firmly situated within the realm of consumption: the new ‘duty’ and ‘right’ for all of those who live within Western democracies. Such an argument is convincing and resonates strongly as it appears increasingly that citizens are relegated to the realm of making choices as opposed to creating options when they engage within the public sphere.

As Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen conclude their book they argue that news professionals need to take their roles more seriously and engage citizens more actively. Arguably, it is in this moment where one of the biggest gaps in the authors’ work is revealed. While they constantly allude to the impact neoliberalism has on reporting practices, and do briefly mention the increasing impact advertising does have on news reporting, the book fails to make an explicit connection between the political and economic relations that govern media ownership and/or directly impact the autonomy of the journalists who ‘produce’ the news. Perhaps the authors assume that readers will already possess a familiarity with the works of scholars such as Robert Hackett, Robert McChesney, Dan Schiller, Yuezhi Zhao, and many others, which detail the clear correlation between what gets reported and the media’s relationship with corporate and state interests. Accordingly, as media conglomerates continue to converge, there is an inevitable and direct impact on the free and democratic reporting practices of the press. While awareness of these factors appears to be implicit in the book’s nar-
rative, the authors’ analysis of how citizens get made up and why certain sources are used over others could have been strengthened had this relationship been more clearly delineated and drawn out. Still, their book remains an important and unique contribution to the social role the news media plays in our everyday lives. This will be a useful resource to both students and researchers who want to think critically about how elements of news production contribute to making the general public up as passive consumers, as opposed to active and engaged political citizens.

References

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