In *Journalism and Political Exclusion: Social Conditions of News Production and Reception*, author Debra M. Clarke critiques the paradox of information poverty in an age of information wealth. Clarke flips the notion of “news publics” on its head and instead posits that there is no true democratic public. Instead, there are news publics constrained by the social conditions of production: limited resources, limited news value criteria, and limited expression for fear of legal repercussion (pp. 145–147). The underrepresentation of a diversity of views in mainstream media can therefore explain the false notion that an increase in media access correlates with an increase in democracy. The author opts to focus her analysis on the social conditions that render political engagement by marginalized communities muted. She concludes that the ironic “journalism-democracy relationship envisioned by neoliberalism” (p. 266) has been refuted by its own politico-ideological constraints. Major social groups are already excluded from democratic publics due to structural inequalities (p. 20), and journalism can be seen to contribute to this exclusion.

Clarke, associate professor of sociology at Trent University, embarks on an extensive study to question how the exclusion of representative groups from information publics reifies dominant discourses in news production. She achieves this through an empirical study of news media reception and critical engagement with the literature. Clarke’s notable contribution to the literature is her empirical study on news reception. The longitudinal study (2001–2007) of 188 Canadian news consumers challenges journalism’s political inclusivity and undresses the fallacy of increased access via “new media” by revealing the consistent connections between new media and the media of old (the press, television, and radio). What, then, is “new media” to the politically engaged, other than old media packaged differently?

The author also offers a critical analysis of the “contemporary social conditions of news production” (p. 9), which serves as commentary on journalism practice. Clarke therefore touches on key concepts in communication theory at the core of political exclusion. For example, she examines how professional journalism as a medium encourages political engagement (p. 226–228). Further, she considers how textual analysis can be better understood beyond communication theory (pp. 104–105, referring to Hall, 1980).

The key themes of Clarke’s book include what news publics are perceived to be, what news publics are in reality, who can participate and on what basis, and what the implications are for media democracy. Clarke debunks popular myths about news media, such as its mandate to facilitate political involvement. The structure of socio-political engagement as co-opted by the narrative news genre has more of a delimiting than an empowering effect. This is in part due to market demands and mass media ownership. The recentring of political views overwhelmingly shared by the state and
by privileged male elites maintains a digital divide that extends beyond representation and into the domain of regulated access. Thus open access to democratic publics, as characterized by the “public sphere,” could be understood to be more of an abstract ideal than an achievable aspiration.

A primary strength of the author is her ability to keep Gramsci’s theory of hegemony as a strong undercurrent throughout the book, carrying the other concepts that flow from it into one sustained commentary. “Hegemony” is identified in the analysis with “the construction and organization of consent” (p. 30, quoting Woodfin, 2006, p. 134) inherent in news media. The purpose of Clarke’s analysis here is not to decry the politics of observable, hard power; her continual reliance on theories of political exclusion and coercive self-disempowerment suggests exclusion is often negotiated. It also suggests a methodological move away from investigating who participates in news publics to who can participate.

While the subject itself is compelling and Clarke’s methods excellent, there is a notable omission. Although her chosen topic of analysis is the sociological basis of political exclusion in journalism, race as a contributing factor is missing from the demographic data collected (p. 278). Clarke does well to continually refer to underrepresentation based on ethnicity (as well as class and gender) and classifies ethnicity as an “important mediator” (p. 11). She also points out that racialized communities are likely to be granted media coverage only when they meet specific criteria for newsworthiness (p. 219). However, there is little analysis of ethnicity and, most importantly, none on race. Clarke justifies her exclusion by stating, “It is clearly not analytically practical to examine all of the conceivable intersections that might be found among news audiences. Hence the central focus here is upon class and gender, both of which are understood to intersect with other axes of identity (such as ethnicity), yet which are also understood to constitute independent, non-relativist social conditions that are each fully and independently forceful in shaping reception experiences” (p. 135). This presents a terrific irony, where the non-inclusion of race in the topic of political exclusion further devalues the contributions of race/space intersectionality in news publics. Further, in the questionnaire sent to participants in her study, none of the 33 questions on the form refer to ethnicity, race, or cultural background, despite her acknowledging ethnicity as a social factor in exclusion (p. 282). This may be tempered by her explanation that news readers—regardless of their racial and/or ethnic background—are classified as either dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readers (p. 267), and it may require a different set of methods altogether to connect the race/ethnicity nexus with news reception (p. 223). As Clarke’s empirical study collects data from community activists in a medium-sized city in Canada, I question whether she sought out racially representative community groups or groups regardless of race. If the latter, then this book, which is an amalgamation of advocacy journalism and scholarly critique, holds true to Clarke’s finding that journalism can exacerbate structural inequalities.

Nonetheless, Clarke advances knowledge on communication theory and practice in social spaces. In my mind there are two particular questions that remain to be explored. First is how race, as “embedded in power structures” (p. 25, quoting Kitzinger,
2004, p. 188), affects political participation, or whether it even matters. There is little convincing evidence to suggest that it does not.

This relates to my second question, which is whether social exclusion based on market forces necessitates a social policy mandate on the part of government. If so, what would it look like? And would it be an effective tool to regulate online publics? Clarke underscores that even “a minimal consensus about democracy’s rudimentary essentials is directly contradicted by the exclusivity that is evident in the internet’s infrastructure” (p. 36, emphasis in original). Greater attention to social conditions, then, has the potential to feed impoverished news publics by better engaging marginalized communities.

References

Terrine Friday, York University