



Voice and agency in post-apartheid South African media

What does the rising number of service delivery protests tell us about who gets to speak and who gets to listen in South African politics? Do politicians listen to the youth, especially the vast numbers of the un- and under-employed? What role do the youth play in social cohesion, civic action and the future of our young democracy?

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These are the questions that prompted us to launch a project into media and citizenship in South Africa on a hunch that it would be a fruitful area for analysis. The mainstream media in South Africa, as Steven Friedman (2011) says, does really seem to hold a view based on and speaking for an urban elite. We wanted to question some of the broad claims the media are making in terms of their contribution to democracy, and wanted to find out what role media actually play in people's lives.

As we've proceeded in this project we've narrowed our focus of study to the situation of young people in this country. They seem to us to be the most important demographic to be paying attention to right now. How they form their civic and political identities in this new democracy, how they understand the roles they can play, how they use the media (and the dazzling array of new technologies), how they forge their way into the future.

In the pages that follow in this section on youth, the media and citizenship, Vanessa Malila writes out of our research as a project, Lynette Steenveld talks about the SANPAD-funded survey (with which our Mellon project on media and citizenship has collaborated, See Malila 2013) into South Africa's youth across five provinces and asks questions about the relationship between consuming news media and citizenship, we focus on the situation of children in the media, we look at technologies like Facebook, Jonathan Jansen challenges us with our narrow version of "politics" and we hear from Australia, where James Arvanitakis writes from the University of Western Sydney, the area on the edge of the city where migrants and marginal people live. These articles provide a wide range of different perspectives on our central theme of how the media construct and re-construct citizenship.

Our approach to our study has been influenced by some important

thinkers on citizenship and we have adopted many of these ideas in order to understand the relationship between the media, politics, citizenship and today's citizens.

Sociologist Patrick Heller (2009: 134) characterises South Africa as having a consolidated formal constitutional democracy but with little capacity among its subaltern citizens to shape public policy. Heller says in South Africa, the ANC has turned local government structures into a site for the (often inadequate) delivery of desperately-needed and essential services (shelter, water, electricity, schools, clinics) thereby making South Africa's poorest people into clients dependent on patronage. The result, he says, is a public domain characterised by powerful interests lobbying for access to the government's ear and "inchoate" local protests when service delivery fails (2009: 137). Neither of these two modes of engagement – while they may be successful in getting media attention or the resolution of problems at times – could be considered voice or participation in the full sense that enriched citizenship in a vibrant public sphere is supposed to offer.

The media often claim to facilitate citizens' participation in political processes. But, we ask in this project, to what extent have the South African media succeeded in fashioning new forms of citizenship in the post-apartheid era? And are the media as central as they like to assert in the relationship between ordinary people and those in power?

Toby Miller argues that the last two hundred years of modernity have produced three zones of citizenship (2007: 35):

1. the political (the right to reside and vote)
2. the economic (the right to work and prosper) and
3. the cultural (the right to know and speak)

Miller says people may also express themselves via media and the markets in ways that do not conform to standard ideas of citizenship



as operating in the realm of the political and economic.

John Hartley believes that people may experience themselves as *both* “citizens and consumers, publics and audiences, workers and traders, all at once” (2010: 238-9). Markers of the membership of these communities and publics may be style and, in the case of subcultures, alternative food, housing and family arrangements or fashion. Especially for those who have traditionally been excluded from civil, social and political rights, “culture” becomes a “battleground where demands for rights and duties are fiercely asserted and denied” (Van Zoonen, 2005: 8). This form of citizenship as consumption, Hartley points out, might be “startling to social theory, but lived by millions” (2010: 238).

Hartley sees a phenomenon emerging which he calls “media citizenship” (2010: 239). This form of citizenship is based on the use of popular media to construct identities, associations and communities. He says the people who are excluded from classic citizenship... are most likely to engage in citizenship of media (2010: 239).

Seen in this way, not only the types of media that facilitate “serious”, rational deliberation can be effective in teaching audiences about civic values and virtues, but also those types of media that are ostensibly focused on leisure and entertainment; soap operas, hip hop music, radio talk shows. These popular media texts should therefore also be taken seriously as part of “media citizenship”.

Then the growth of new media technologies (particularly on cellphone which surprisingly is reaching into the deepest rural areas) have given individuals tools to connect with others that bypass the ordinary media and the public sphere convened by those in power. Hartley refers to this form of citizenship as “DIY citizenship” (2010: 239) because it is dynamic and constructed bottom-up rather than through formal processes.

The consequence of all the processes is that mass media can no longer “speak both to and for the entire

citizenry”, or assume the existence of *the* public. As a result, Hartley says:

... much smaller groups can self-organise and self-represent, and act both culturally and politically, without bearing the weight of ‘standing for’ the whole society. As a result, ‘DIY citizenship’ is arguably becoming more democratic as individual media (content-platforms) become less popular (2010: 240).

All of this tells us that we can make no normative assumptions about the centrality and importance of news media and journalism for democracy. Young people in studies in the developed world (see Irene Costera Meier’s report on her work in the Netherlands, see RJR 30 “The wisdom of the crowds”) and young people here in South Africa tell us that while they value the news as an important cloud of knowing (i.e. just there if you need to refer to it) they find it really hard to imagine how the news, which barely represents them or their interests, is going to play a part in their formulation of identity or decisions about the future.

References

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