

The meanings of citizenship: media use and democracy in South Africa

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In 1994, South Africans embarked on a project to create new meanings of citizenship in order to transcend the disenfranchisement and divisions created by apartheid. This article examines the context in which new forms of citizenship are evolving in South Africa and how South African citizens use the media to give meaning to concepts such as “an active public sphere,” “civic agency” and “participatory politics.” The objective of the research is to provide information about the way in which the media contribute to the quality of democracy in South Africa through mediating citizenship in a way that improves prospects for citizens to exert influence over public decisions. As has been the case in other post-authoritarian and postcolonial settings, the continuation of existing unequal relationships to government persists even when new democratic spaces have opened up. This article interrogates the assumption that media are central to citizens’ political and civic engagements in a transitional society marked by persisting inequalities. This interrogation draws on empirical research with citizens to investigate the question that the media are central to constructions of citizenship and participation and engagement with democratic processes. Our research finds that young South Africans interviewed are disengaged from politics and find that the media does not speak to or connect with their everyday lives. They view the state on both national and local levels as not being prepared to listen to their experiences, ideas or conditions of life. While the respondents trust the media as credible institutions, they do not experience the media as being relevant to their lives. The perceived disinterest of the state and the lack of relevance of the media, work together to create a sense of powerlessness and inability to influence policy-making among the young people interviewed. For the media to intervene in this state of affairs, it would have to create more opportunities for young people to participate directly in meaning production through the media, starting by listening more closely to their experiences in order to respond to their concerns in a relevant way.

Keywords: agency; citizenship; democracy; listening; media; political participation; voice; youth

Introduction

It is often assumed that the media are central to citizens’ political and civic engagements in a democracy. In post-apartheid South Africa, the media themselves often make the claim that they should be allowed to operate freely and independently because their work is foundational to democratic deliberation and participation, in that they provide information needed by citizens to make informed political choices. These assumptions, drawn from democratic discourses in established, Western

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