Mediated Politics and Everyday Life

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The construction, representation and reproduction of everyday life as a political domain has been a central theme in the work of Roger Silverstone and constitutes his most important legacy to social theory. Conceiving everyday life as a site of sense-making and negotiation, of the taken for granted and the taken by surprise, of finding and making, Silverstone offers us a way out of the false dichotomy between everyday life as imposed ideology (the dystopian perspective) and resistant populism (the utopian perspective). In this brief essay, I want to explore the tensions between finding and making reality in the context of contemporary anxieties about the disconnection of mediated politics from everyday life. In particular, I want to reflect upon what I consider to be the profound relevance of Silverstone's conception of the media as potential space to the burdens of democratic citizenship. The political domain, in the broadest sense of the circulation and reproduction of power, as well as its institutional settings and boundaries, were never far from Silverstone's work; indeed, they were often accorded a conceptual reverence which regarded the political as the central *locus* of communicative contestation. But this was not a domain to which Silverstone paid much explicit attention in most of his work; perhaps he found its moral thinness unsettling. This essay constitutes an attempt to make this connection.

The trouble with mediated politics

Ours is an age in which television is outperformed by reality. The disaster-movie choreography of 9/11, the promiscuous brutality of Rwanda and Darfur, the suicidal drift of global warming, the retreat to primitive revenge in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay are some of the more striking contemporary manifestations of what Shaviro has referred to as 'the stubborn excess of the real.' (Shaviro, n.d.) Media professionals strive to contain such excesses within their ritualised formats of representation, leaving audiences to witness television as an increasingly disruptive intruder upon the stability of everyday life.

There is something of an irony in the fact that political actors and institutions have become so deeply assimilated within the performative world of the mass media – particularly television – at a time when the capacity of television to capture the rhythms and dramas of everyday life seems more limited and vulnerable than ever before. Public distrust of mediated constructions casts a dark shadow over the claims of political ventriloquists to speak for 'ordinary' people. Politicians are under increasing pressure to display their *real* selves; to prove their authenticity. In an age of mediated political intimacy, the role of being a representative entails appearing to be someone who is extraordinary enough to represent others, but ordinary enough to be representative of others. Politicians are required to invest emotionally in messages that could in the past have taken the form of impersonal publicity and to make visible aspects of their lives that were once strictly private.

Despite politicians' strategies for bridging the chasm between the spheres of politics and everyday life, deep public distrust prevails. Whereas most UK citizens (79%) trust their local hospital (with

this figure increasing the more recently that they have visited it), only a minority trust their local council (48%), politicians in general (18%) or political parties (16%). (Coleman, 2005) Around one in five citizens trust journalists to tell the truth. (Worcester, 2003) Much has been written – and will continue to be written – about why this breakdown of trust has happened, who is responsible, and how politicians and journalists might attempt to gain (or regain) public trust.

But trust is more than a strategic aspiration designed to charm consumers and voters into compliant routines. For Silverstone, trust is 'the *sine qua non* of social life,' 'the precondition for ontological security and for our capacity to sustain an active anxiety-controlling engagement in the everyday world.' (Silverstone, 1994: 6) And television is intimately involved in the project of 'extending our reach and our security in a world of information' through its permanence, dependability, reassurances, illusions and explanations. (Silverstone, 1994:19) Television contributes to the management of time, distance, risk, complexity and taste. It is in this context that the crisis of trust in mediated politics is not just about the authenticity of claims made by political actors and institutions, but about the ways in which we come to know them – or think we know them – or not quite know them at all. In short, it is about the relationship of political claims to lay epistemologies.

How the political world is found and made

In the everyday experience of most citizens, politics, in the formal sense of the term, is encountered only occasionally and peripherally. The rules of the political game strike most people as opaque and its main players appear to be remote and inaccessible. Politics is something one hears about from a safe domestic distance: not quite comprehensible news stories; prize-fight interviews; the relentless tedium of election campaigns; wars when it all goes wrong. For most people, the political is something to be tolerated, humoured or avoided, but at the same time inevitable. In this sense, politics is stumbled upon rather than actively created.

In their efforts to 'follow' and 'keep up with' politics (these are revealing verbs), citizens are faced with formidable searching tasks which take three forms. Firstly, there is the need to *find* where things are; specifically, where power lies. This entails complex work of mapping and distinguishing between apparently similar actors and institutions: parliament and government; the Council of Europe and the European Council; county councils and parish councils; Labour and New Labour; Blair and Cameron; MPs, MEPs, MSPs. And also more sensitive distinctions: us and them; normal and other; talk and action; representative and delegate; free from and free to. In short, a bewildering array of categories and spaces of power face the citizen who takes seriously the injunction to engage with politics. It is tempting to give up at the first hurdle. Even finding the discrete spaces of the political is too demanding a task of navigation for many citizens.

Secondly, there is the need to *find out*: to keep up with the news, which involves more than simply being aware of present events. Being politically informed entails a deep encounter with history. Like soap opera fans, political citizens are expected to possess a minimal acquaintance with the winding trajectories of the plot. Simply following the accounts of political journalism calls for prodigious feats of memory. As anyone who has prepared to participate in a televised political interview will know, the main

preparation involves remembering the dates, statistics, names and records which constitute the political rhetoric of authority and expertise. Citizens who want to make sense of political communication are expected to engage with these archaeologies of remembrance: to find out about the rules of the game, the established players and the acknowledged tactics of winning. There is so much to find out that not knowing is sometimes easier.

Thirdly, citizens of pluralistic democracies are exposed to a vast volume of *findings* – by scientists, policy-makers, pollsters, the media – which exceed their temporal, and often cognitive, capacity for critical reflection. The ethos of democracy places upon citizens the often unmanageable burden of discriminating between valuable and spurious information. Faced by a torrent of conflicting and competing findings, it is tempting to give up, developing strategies of inattention (Gitlin, 2002) and retreating into the sullen impotence of the bewildered spectator. Eliasoph (1998) has perceptively explored such displays of withdrawal from the heavy burdens of political responsibility, identifying three types: the 'cynical chic' who make a virtue of their own powerlessness by exaggerating and celebrating their ignorance of politics; the 'macho exaggerators' who employ verbal shock tactics to strip political questions of their consequential seriousness; and the 'literary critics' who judge politics as if they were critics viewing a show. These displays are a response to the unbearable pressure of being surrounded by a political world which they are expected to find – and find relevant.

As well as being demanding, there is something democratically unsettling about citizenship as a process of finding. The tendency of the media to approach politics as if it were a natural phenomenon - to uncover politics, reveal its inner workings, open it up to public scrutiny – serves to conceal its history and genealogy, thereby fetishising the structures, processes and habits that dominate the formal political realm. The media draw their findings from authoritative sources and package them in ways that leave citizens with the impression that what needs to be known is already there to be found, and that what is eventually found defines and limits the political domain. In this sense, the media contribute to the constitution of the political realm that they seek to observe.

But there is more to democratic communication than the perpetual downward flow of elite messages to curious and bewildered subjects. A quite different perspective sees citizenship as a process of reflexive creativity, with politics as an outcome of everyday communication rather than its structural constraint. Writers such as Thompson, Rude and Burke, who see the political as emerging from a dialectical encounter between existing power structures and immanent popular agency, have resisted the conception of the citizen as searcher for politics. In contrast to citizenship as finding stands the notion of citizenship as making (Dewey, 1927; Bang, 2005) which seeks to place the narrative of politics within the mundane, micropolitical practices of everyday life. What in practice does it mean to speak of politics as a creative activity? Firstly, that the spaces in which political activities are to be found are far less officially-defined and demarcated from everyday life than institutional political communication scholars would have us believe. As Negt and Kluge (1993: 485) have suggested, 'The public sphere possesses use value when social experience organises itself within it.' The political in this sense is characterised by its proximity to everyday experience rather than its embeddedness within official centres of power. Manifestations of public experience are more likely to be found within what Habermas (1997) has called 'unsubverted circuits of communication' than through the traditional channels of top-down transmission. So creative

political communication assumes diverse and unorthodox forms, from blogs reflecting upon workplace frustrations to casual conversations about celebrity values, to crowds at football matches putting subversive lyrics to commercially popular songs. Not only are spaces of the political more random and discrete within the terms of this characterisation, but so are the temporal commitments of the politically engaged.

Politics is conceived as being more incidental and casual than, for example, the lifelong project of joining a political party. Writing about what he calls 'everyday makers (EMs),' a category comprising 'a form of lay citizenship shaped by everyday experience,' Bang observes that

> EMs dissociate themselves from ECs [Expert Citizens] in insisting on being ordinary and being in politics for other reasons than to acquire success or influence. Furthermore, they do not have the same full-time project identity as ECs, because they loathe thinking of political participation as being 'for life.' EMs are not disinterested in democratic government or opposition to it either. But, they do not want to participate actively in it, because they think politics and policy should be something one engages in at close range, on one's own terms, and when one feels the inclination to it. (Bang, 2005: 18-19)

Secondly, the creativist perspective assumes that the language of politics exceeds the terms of instrumental rationality. That is not to say that politics does not reflect the base preoccupations of traditional political conflict, but that it does not do so to the exclusion of the symbolic, affective and aesthetic dimensions of everyday human interaction. This has important consequences for our understanding of political communication, for if, as Eliasoph argues, the expression of political views entails not simply utterances in response to survey questions, but self-presenting displays which articulate relationships to power, it is no longer possible to pretend that 'scientific techniques' of opinion measurement provide us with more than the most crude and superficial sense of what people really think. Other methods of listening to citizens might be less justifiable in terms of effective scientificity, but more likely to discern the meanings and intensities that shape, and inhere within, public opinion. Indeed, in a culture such as the UK, which is characterised by anxieties about the disjunction between formal speech and intended meaning, more reflexive approaches to political hearing might call for techniques closer to literary analysis (or even psychoanalysis) than to mass sampling.

Thirdly, and intimately related to the latter points, politics as creativity assumes that contestation occurs in relation to a more expansive range of issues than can be found in the average party manifesto. As shorthand, such agendas are often referred to as emphasising personal and cultural perspectives, but, more importantly, they focus upon the creativity of citizens as reflexive agents rather than as reactive respondents to systemic pressures.

This emphasis upon citizens as makers and creators offers a refreshing contrast to the institutionalist determinism that has too often resulted in a dehumanisation of political-science perspectives. In the specific context of political communication, this new approach allows scholars to avert their gaze from the orthodox sources and channels of vertical message transmission and engage more

productively with the vast array of creative networks which occupy the subterranean regions of the political sphere. And yet, despite the limited empirical data offered by creativists such as Bang, there remains a sense in which the creative citizen is more an ideological aspiration than a rounded, descriptive account. The concept of creativity is problematic. If we define it in basic terms as the process of making something new happen – or, as Gotz puts it, 'deliberately concretising insight' (Gotz, 1981: 300) - we are forced to concede that most civic and political communication is not of this kind. On the contrary, most political talk (between friends, on television, online) comprises recursive reflections upon what has already happened. Bang's 'everyday makers' are not, generally speaking, setting new agendas or invoking innovative concepts, but simply engaging with power in non-routine ways. What is encouraging about this 'politics from below' is not its creative outcomes, but the space it opens up for ordinary people, acting in everyday settings, to make a difference in human affairs. As Giddens puts it, 'action depends on the capability of the individual to "make a difference", that is, to exercise some sort of power.' (Giddens, 1984: 15) It is this capacity to act creatively, rather than the climactic realisation of creativity, that matters. A space emerges in which civic insights might become concretised.

Silverstone's concept of 'potential space'

It is here that Roger Silverstone's development of Winnicott's concept of 'potential space' becomes centrally significant. According to Silverstone, potential space can be read as more than a psychoanalytical concept defining the tension between dependence and independence in the infant's relationship with its mother. It is a socially generalisable concept, describing the tension in everyday life between 'the found object and the created object – the imposed meanings and the selected meanings – the controlled behaviour and the free – the meaningless and the meaningful – the passive and the active.' (Silverstone, 1994: 165) I do not have space here to detail how Silverstone positions television as a transitional object within the potential space of everyday life, and I could not hope to do so in the poetically sensitive terms that characterise his unique style. Broadly speaking, Silverstone regards the space between the production and reception of television as one in which subjective realities are shaped and reshaped. Television is, in this sense, what Winnicott refers to as 'a transitional object': a potential space in which meaning unfolds out of the creative tensions between reality as represented by programme producers and lived by sense-making receivers. In the context of the present line of argument, which is concerned with the mediation of politics and its consequences for democratic citizenship, potential space can be understood as a site of ongoing political negotiation between structure and agency: citizens as finders *and* makers, as 'part subjects, part objects, the voluntary agents of our involuntary determination.' (Thompson, 1978: 119)

For scholars seeking to understand the ways in which mediated politics shapes and constrains the work of citizenship, the idea of potential space allows us to transcend the dichotomy between duped and resistant subjects. Instead, we have a theoretical tool that helps to make sense of the dialectical contestation between the structural rationalities imposed by the 'systems world' and the informal sense-making of the 'lifeworld.' Much of my own research has been devoted to an exploration of this dialectic, although I have paid rather too little explicit attention to the concept of potential space. The following two sections explore the notion of media as potential space. Both illustrations are drawn from my own research.

My first example is a Northern Irish phone-in programme which provides a potential space for communities in conflict to address one another. The second example considers how participation in the UK version of *Big Brother* might be understood as a potential space in which politically disenchanted citizens can engage with questions of ethics, power and accountability without feeling obliged to take part in the over-complicated, demographically exclusive, excessively solemn and frequently inconsequential rituals and routines of traditional politics.

Potential space and safe talk

BBC Radio Ulster's *Talkback* phone-in programme has been broadcast for one hour daily each weekday since 1986. It attracts an audience of 75,000 listeners each day: around 30% of the Northern Irish radio audience, and more in the Republic of Ireland. Since 1989, the programme has been presented by David Dunseith, himself something of a legendary figure in Northern Irish broadcasting. Addressing an audience which is characterised by deep sectarian divisions, often meaning that they co-exist in segregation and mutual fear, Dunseith's role as a mediator between otherwise socially exclusive factions is unique in broadcasting. Dunseith operates on the basis that all talk, even when it is manifestly prejudiced, is better than none, especially if it allows opinion to be tested within a public sphere in which people cannot only listen to the ranting of their own side: 'For too many years in this community people have lived by the old cliché, whatever you say, say nothing … The fact that people are actually addressing issues, talking about them, listening to other views is a good thing … We simply provide a facility here which allows as many people as possible to express views, to acknowledge views and to engage in debate.' (*Irish News*, 17th January 1998.)

I used content analysis and participant interviews to study *Talkback* at two historical moments in recent Northern Irish history: the weeks before and immediately after the Drumcree Orange parade in July 1997, when sectarian tensions were particularly high; and the week before the announcement of the Peace Agreement in April 1998, when both sides of the sectarian divide had reason to appeal for a peace agreement of advantage to them. Both periods were moments of high political drama, with 'talks' taking place at the political apex which could only have had any effect if they carried broad popular support. The majority of the population, detached from the 'talks', were enabled to become expressive participants by contributing to the 'talk'. Phone-in talk became an informal, inclusive citizen-based version of 'the talks'. An editorial in *The Guardian* (UK newspaper) referred to *Talkback* as providing 'a virtual alternative version of the peace talks.' Indeed, on both occasions under consideration, the talks and the radio talk converged, with Dunseith inviting politicians from the talks to appear before his public to talk to and with what, at least for the duration of the programme, became *the* public: a single public; the *Talkback* public. Here was a case of the media creating a potential space for intersubjective dialogue between people who would not normally listen to one another. What happened?

The majority of callers on air during the weeks of observation spoke within the explicit framework of a sectarian position. Non-sectarian calls were exceptional. Callers tended to address their comments in one of three ways: directly to the presenter; indirectly to the overhearing other side, via the presenter; to their own side whom they wished to transform from a passive to an active audience. In the case of the 1997 marching season, most callers appealed for greater understanding and sensitivity - but the appeal

was made, via Dunseith, always to the other side. To hard-line unionists and nationalists Dunseith would plead for tolerance, always maintaining a half-cynical, half-whimsical expression somewhat short of hope and despair. Dunseith moved easily from responding to callers to addressing the listening public, as if the social function of the calls was to serve as pieces in a social jigsaw out of which a cohesive public presence could be constructed.

Inter-communal cross-talk did occasionally occur, such as on 10 July 1997 when an Orangeman (unionist sectarian) called to point out that protestants had never tried to disrupt catholics' St Patrick's Day parades in Northern Ireland and then shifts from this descriptive account to a sectarian assertion:

> Caller: Orangemen are mainly working men paying taxes. I believe that the majority of people on the Garvaghy Road [catholic area, SC]… a lot of them don't work.

Was this a mere statement of prejudice to be shared with the Unionist public? Was it intended to provoke catholics whose sensitivities were an obstacle to the Drumcree parade? Whichever, the call prompted a direct response from a catholic mother of eight children from the Garvaghy Road:

> Caller: I say to that previous caller, come and live in the Garvaghy Road with us and you'll see that we are ordinary people just like himself. And I begrudge anybody saying that people on the Garvaghy Road don't work. 99.9% of the people here want to work, and do work when they can get work. That man has done me a favour. I am very, very angry. I was a bit nervous but now I'm not … just angry. I'm not frightened like I was on Sunday morning. Anger has overcome fear. And I will not let that man, nor any of the Unionist politicians, run down this area.

The syntactical shift in the first sentence indicates the potential publics to whom this call is addressed. Through Dunseith, the catholic invites the previous protestant caller to come into her area and then *you'll* see that *we* are *ordinary people* just like *himself.* She addresses the Orangeman directly on behalf of a 'we' (her own community) referred to by him as 'them'; she invokes the ordinariness of this other public, i.e. it is part of a collective public no different from his own. It is also significant to hear the caller's perception of her own shift of consciousness as a result of hearing the opposing caller: from being nervous and frightened she has been spurred to verbal action (and, of course, talk *is* action) which is explicitly political.

As well as these uses of the phone-in as a potential space for dialogue without physical co-presence, it also serves as a cathartic space for the public expression of sectarian anxieties. On 3 April 1998, in the midst of the peace talks, a caller from Cherry Valley, Belfast states that

> It seems to me the Unionists are being asked to give up what is most precious to them, and it's all in pursuit of a myth. Because the only time Ireland was a united country was under the British. But the things they are being asked to give up are very precious: the Union Flag, allegiance to the Queen, and the 'Royal' is to come out of the RUC … It just simply is not on.

A Nationalist caller responds, not to the points made, but to rehearse his own mirror anxieties about national identity:

Caller: …Nationalists don't live in the Six Counties. They live in Ireland. There is nowhere as foreign as England.

I do not want to discuss here the political question of whether *Talkback* played a positive or negative role during these two tense periods. Regardless of any such tangible consequence, *Talkback* can be seen as an opening up of a unique media space which, rather than confronting citizens with representations which exceed their experience of the real, allowed them to speak for themselves and thereby realise the possibility of making a difference in their own affairs. In Silverstone's terms, *Talkback* provides a safe space in which a particular set of historical relationships can both be faced up to, as found circumstances, and remade through the process of mediation - in several senses of that term. If in this first example, potential space clears the ground for political acknowledgement and contestation, in the second example it serves as a space of political avoidance, but not evasion.

Potential space and the bypassing of official politics

In two extensive studies of the *Big Brother* audience (both viewers and active voters) I have endeavoured to understand their contrasting experiences of participating interactively in the reality TV game and in the sphere of formal politics. My aim has not been to compare like with like, but to explore the borders between the political and the popular and to reflect upon the potential for alternative modes of representation and self-presentation which bypass official politics. The empirical findings are set out in other papers (Coleman, 2003, 2006), but my purpose here is to summarise what they seem to tell us about popular strategies for both escaping from and embracing the political.

Big Brother viewers and voters (BBs) are not significantly less interested in politics than the average British citizen. Members of my BB panel, who were polled once every three days throughout the course of the 2005 general election campaign, did follow the general election campaign, both via the mass media and online, but they often felt themselves to be outsiders in someone else's story. They did talk to their friends and families about the election, but they often chose to talk about about other issues that they regarded as more important. They did arrive at political judgements, but their means of doing so rarely conformed to the calculating schemes of rational choice theorists. They did vote for an MP and a government, but they often wondered why voting failed to engage them in ways that remote-control TV voting clearly does. Their activism was not always enthusiastic and they often lacked a belief in their efficacy as political citizens, but they did play the game, even though its rules were opaque and its outcome uninspiring. (Coleman, 2006: 474)

While BBs regarded participation in the general election as a solemn obligation, to be reluctantly performed or casually avoided, they experienced taking part in *Big Brother* as an opportunity to test and express their own values. A majority of BBs (54%) considered that the *Big Brother* format, in which candidates are under constant surveillance, with the least popular voted out each week, would be a better way of electing representatives than the present electoral system. When they were invited to complete the

sentence, 'If *Big Brother* voters decided the result of the election, it would be better because…,' BBs emphasised two different aspects of representation which they thought the *Big Brother* approach to elections might enhance. Firstly, they considered that representatives would be forced to become more exposed and open to emotional surveillance. In an election determined by BBs, they argued, 'we'd get to see the real person and we'd get to see a lot more of them' and 'the most genuine person would win' and 'you may see the actual personality of the politician, not just the public person.' The result, they suggested, would be that 'the false candidates would be weeded out' and 'true character would be judged, rather than the facade.' Secondly, panel members considered that *Big Brother* voters would constitute a more representative electorate: 'you would get an overall vote from the entire population rather than the middle- class voters' view' and 'the ordinary people would decide who represents them.' BBs were eager to emphasise that they could bring a degree of emotional intelligence to the electoral process which is at present being squeezed out.

For BBs, the experience of scrutinising and evaluating the authenticity of the constantly exhibited contestants in *Big Brother* presents an opportunity to reflect upon vital questions of integrity and trust. These are extraordinarily complex and bewildering moral, psychological and political questions which are rarely addressed formally in the world of traditional politics – even though it is commonly believed on an informal level that politicians are untrustworthy and lacking in integrity. Authenticity resides in the opaque space between performance and unconscious action. It is captured in moments and glimpses and represented as much by what is not said as what is said. When a person exhibits more authentic than contrived behaviour they are seen to possess integrity. When a person is less likely to betray than support us, given the real choice, they become entitled to our trust. In a world of complex risk, we are constantly in danger of falling prey to fake integrity and undeserving trust, so mediated exercises in which people are invited to evaluate the integrity and trust of others as it unfolds in daily instalments and continuous, digital exposure, are hardly banal or non-political.

Critics of *Big Brother* – and mediated products like it, ranging from soaps to docudramas – argue that such potential political spaces are merely distractions from real politics. For example, the *Guardian* columnist, Jonathan Freedland, bemoans the fact that 'not a single minute of *Big Brother* has shown a discussion of what we used to call public affairs: there is not a word about politics. It is all about relationships - with each other, past loves or themselves.' (9 August 2000) Criticism of this nature draws rigid distinctions between political and other democratic forms of participation, failing to acknowledge that debates about asylum seekers, inequality, cheating, bullying, anarchism, sexual identity, religious fundamentalism and war – all of which have figured in *Big Brother* in the past five years – are just as much about 'public affairs' than elite-driven debates about the proposed European Constitution or proportional representation. In everyday life, democratic practice occurs in many spaces beyond the formally political, from ways in which power is negotiated in the home to ways in which (more generally) young people contest adult expectations; from acts of resistance against cultural snobbery to debates about what constitutes offensive humour; from the subversive lyrics of pop songs to the shared code of open-source software. These, I would argue, are the potential spaces of democracy – and the formal political system will only diminish its legitimacy by condescendingly disengaging from them.

The media as potentially democratic space?

Democracy depends upon citizenship, but citizens are faced with the dilemma of being a promiscuous gathering of strangers, dependent upon one another's reason and decency for survival, but never fully able to know or understand one another. The most powerful democratic function of the mass media is to introduce the public to itself: to diminish the otherness of strangers by allowing us to encounter them, and them us. This task places a huge ethical burden upon media organisations, regulators and receivers and calls for what Roger Silverstone has described as 'a moral discourse which recognizes our responsibility for the other person in a world of great conflict, tragedy, intolerance and indifference, and which critically engages with our media's incapacity (as well as its occasional capacity) to engage with the reality of that difference, responsibly and humanely.' (Silverstone, 2004)

In the two examples discussed above, elements of such a moral discourse are emerging. In the case of *Talkback,* fundamental (and sometimes fundamentalist) differences of identity are at least brought within hearing distance of one another, opening up the possibility of responsible and humane approaches to cultural co-existence. In the case of *Big Brother* we are faced with a different way of thinking about power and accountability. Both examples refer to spaces in which the mutually obscure experiential worlds of strangers are contained within a temporary political sphere. These are not institutions in which resolution and settlement are sought, but temporally ephemeral, politically nimble spaces of experimentation and negotiation. It is precisely this characteristic ambiguity and instability which imbues such spaces with historical potentiality.

The democratic challenge for the media is not to simulate community or communion – the pretence of togetherness - but to help us deal with a world where we are never, and can never, be one and together. The less like strangers to one another we are able to become, the better democracy works; but the only way to transcend our mutual strangeness is to first accept the inevitability of difference. It is not reconnection that democracy needs most, but a healthy respect for the reality of disconnection. Technologies of instant connection are confidence tricks, like the White House web site to which one can 'send a message to the President.' 'I think you're a lying trickster' says the message; 'the President thanks you so much for your message' says the almost-instant response. Authentic recognition lies in the irregular, non-instant response, just as real music lies in the instrument that is not pre-programmed to have a perfectly regular beat.

The examples discussed above – and many others like them, scattered across the global mediascape – are evidence of cracks opening up in spaces of mass communication that have been historically disconnected from the energies, ambiguities and self-expression of everyday life. These cracks in the edifice comprise potential democratic space precisely because they allow the tensions between systemic and experiential realities (the system-world and the lifeworld) to perform a creative role. Potential space, in its political context, is less about establishing 'reconnection' than exploring the latent vitality of the diverse disconnections that constitute democracy. Media policies intended to nurture and expand such spaces stand a chance of contributing to the ethos of democracy. For, as Roger Silverstone reminded us with Talmudic moral force, 'We study the media because we are concerned about their power … and we want to harness that power for good rather than ill.' (Silverstone, 1999: 143)

Biography

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