Introduction

History not only has its ups and downs, it also has a capacity to surprise us as to when an "up" or a "down" is coming – scientific prognoses and futurology notwithstanding. Thus, in our recent past, the collapse of the communist regimes of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe took most observers more or less by surprise. In the Western democracies, following the fall of the Wall, the self-assuredness about the political system was running high; "We won!" was a widespread sentiment. It may therefore seem a bit ironic that only a few short years later, in the early and mid-1990s, there was a growing international awareness that not only is the transition to democracy – in Eastern Europe and elsewhere – a difficult process, but also that the established Western democracies had hit upon disturbing times.

Today, scholars, journalists, politicians, and citizens are asking themselves if and how the democratic quality of their societies can be maintained and enhanced, and in what ways our democratic deficits can be addressed. A core theme in this regard is the question of political engagement: Without a minimal level of involvement from its citizens, democracy loses legitimacy and may cease to function in a genuine way. The decline in citizens' participation in the life of democracy has been continuing over several decades, and the patterns are most pronounced among the young. Often linked to this theme are the character and role of the media in society, both newer, interactive information and communication technologies (ICTs) as well as the mass media. Drawing on extensive literature from several areas, this book addresses political engagement and disengagement – and the media's role in this regard – as situated within the tension between the ideals and present realities of democracy.

PROTEAN DEMOCRACY

Democracy emerges, at best, unevenly across the world, through political struggles; it rarely comes as a gift to the people from the powerful circles. In the effort to develop democracy, different societies have had different circumstances and histories, and even varying conceptions about its ideals. Even among the actually existing Western democracies one finds various models at work: Political traditions and the mechanisms shaping political communication can vary significantly (Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Moreover, democracy is continually at risk from antidemocratic forces, some of which even use the processes of democracy itself to further their cause, as we see in the recent growth of extreme right-wing, racist parties in Europe. And in the struggling democracies, the formal appearances may well conceal deeply undemocratic mechanisms and practices: The health of any particular democracy cannot be assumed simply because, for example, elections are being held.

Adding to the complexity is that within political theory there are competing versions of democracy with corresponding notions about to what extent citizens can and should be engaged in politics, and what this engagement should look like. Such theoretical horizons are of course tied up with even more fundamental normative conceptions and assumptions about people and society. Thus, while the emblem of democracy is often rhetorically invoked as an ideal in order to unite, inspire, and mobilize, government "of, by, and for the people" can be given rather different slants and applied in various ways.

Democracy embodies a necessary and irreducible utopian impulse and can be seen as our summary term for "the good society," remaining always a work "in progress." It follows that any view that suggests that the ultimate arrangements have now been achieved – and are suitable for all societies in all circumstances – risks reducing the vision to a form of what might be termed "democratism" – that is, a rigid ideological construct that can obstruct critical reflection, discussion, and intervention.

THE MEDIA CONNECTION

The media are a prerequisite – though by no means a guarantee – for shaping the democratic character of society; they are the bearers of democracy's political communication beyond face-to-face settings. During the modern era, their role in making politics (and society)

visible, in providing information, analysis, forums for debate, and a shared democratic culture, is beyond dispute. The modern world would be unrecognizable without them. Today they are ubiquitous and continue to expand. In Western democracies they have been both praised and vehemently criticized, but however we judge them, the media are an integral part of our contemporary reality, a major historical force.

Many factors shape late modern democracy, and we would be foolish to lapse into media-centrism and reduce everything simply to the workings of the media. How we think about public issues, for example, is not simply a mirror of mediated political communication, but the result of an array of variables. Moreover, the media – both the traditional mass media and the newer ICTs – do not function as a unified societal force but are a complex set of institutions, diverse in the way that they operate and in the representations and communicative opportunities that they provide. They are shaped by internal organizational, economic, and technical features as well as by external societal conditions. And increasingly, their present turbulent situation means that their character and their role in democracy are in transition. Thus, to understand the present circumstances, we have to situate both democracy and the media in the context of larger historical changes.

While the media are important factors of change in the contemporary dynamics of democracy, they also help maintain continuity, providing stability via their established ways of covering politics, the collective frames of reference they foster, and the rather ritualistic elements that characterize their modes of representation. The two positions are not mutually exclusive, and both premises inform this book. In part, it is a question of time frame: From day to day we tend to recognize the stable, recurring features of society. As we increase the temporal span of our perspective, however, the changes come more clearly into view. Not least we come to see how rapidly the media themselves are evolving today – a development that inexorably impacts on political communication specifically, and democracy more generally.

USEFUL THEORIES

This book has its roots in the field of media and communication studies, a sprawling and fragmented area of inquiry – but a very exciting one. This heterogeneous character was apparently more problematic in previous decades than it is now. We have learned our postmodern scientific lessons, we are a bit more at ease with epistemological ambivalence,

more tolerant of intellectual difference, and perhaps more appreciative of pluralism. In terms of theory, the field is permeable, resulting in a productive "free flow" across its borders. It is useful to keep in mind Denis McQuail's formulation that theory is not just formal propositions, but also comprises "any systematic set of ideas that can help make sense of a phenomenon, guide action or predict a consequence" (McQuail, 2000:7). Such a view highlights theory's function as the intellectual scaffolding for the research we do. It serves to orient us, to pull together sets of facts and assumptions, and it offers normative dispositions. It helps to provide significance to that which we observe, and to suggest the implications of various types of actions or interventions.

Media theory and the allies that it mobilizes have an obligation to help us better understand not just the institutions of the media or the processes of communication, even if these are central, but also the fundamental features and processes of the modern world (which, I would underscore, are increasingly known to us via the media). This world – our societies, our cultures – is not only in rapid transformation, but also in many ways in a profound malaise, a reality that theory cannot ignore. Thus, useful theories, while they can make no a priori truth claims and must remain dialogically open, should strive to articulate empirical social reality with notions of better possible alternatives. It is thus imperative that in the theories we use we can find helpful normative guides that can prompt question-asking and inspire research that might help reduce our collective distress.

DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA: THREE TRADITIONS

While I draw generally in this book from various currents in social theory and media theory, not least with constructionist influences, my attempts to deal with the array of problems that cluster around the key notions of democracy and the media derive largely from three specific traditions. I have not tried, nor would I propose, a synthesis of them. Rather, I have used them in different ways, aware of the contributions and problems of each; they come into play clearly, especially in the framework of civic cultures that I develop in Chapter 5. This trilogy consists of political communication, public sphere theory, and culturalist theory.

Political communication derives from its mother discipline of political science, and much of the research work done still reflects this heritage. Research in political communication has traditionally focused on the communicative interaction between the formal actors within

the political communication system: political institutions/actors, the media, and citizens. One problem here is the assumption that politics is played out largely in the interaction between these institutionalized actors, thus ignoring other domains and forms of politics. Also, this tradition, in highlighting citizens' opinions and knowledge of politics, builds for the most part upon a transmission view of communication, ignoring both how meaning is culturally constructed and the subjective aspects of citizenship. This tradition has evoked criticisms over the years for being too formalistic, too bound to the prevailing political/institutional arrangements, too state-centered, too wedded to narrow methodologies – and too nonresponsive toward its critics. I tend to agree, yet this horizon is indispensable for my purposes, since it addresses the important realm of formal, democratic politics from a media and communications angle. Political communication has since its inception also had the theme of nonparticipation as a part of its research agenda.

The public sphere tradition that derives from Habermas includes a range of interests and approaches that take up not only the public sphere, but also related themes such as communicative rationality, deliberative democracy, and civil society. Habermas's (1989) early work on the public sphere was influenced by the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and emphatically asserts the norms of democracy in the face of the historical and social forces that threaten it. Adding his later work on communicative rationality (Habermas, 1984, 1987) opens the door to emphasizing the deliberative, procedural character of communication in the public sphere. The public sphere tradition often looks critically at institutional arrangements, especially in the media, as well as constellations of power and patterns of communication that can support or hinder democracy. While this tradition resonates well with the critical political economy of the media, it often seem oddly removed from everyday sociological realities. Its strength lies in its historical, analytical, and not least normative scope, yet this might be more productively balanced by a greater attention to the socio-cultural circumstances of citizens.

A third tradition builds on various currents within late modern cultural theory; to label it a "cultural studies" approach may seem convenient but is not necessarily illuminating, given the heterogeneity of that field (see Dahlgren, 1997). I thus settle for "culturalist." First it must be said that there is not as yet that much work amassed in this tradition explicitly concerning politics in the traditional sense, though "the political" is often a topic of concern. What the culturalist approach

offers is perspectives on such key themes as meaning, identity, and practices – highlighting the idea of sense-making agents. This can be mobilized in conceptualizing citizenship, as well as in analyzing and assessing features of political communication. The culturalist orientation, for its part, can turn our attention to topics such as the subjective realities of citizenship, their processes of sense making in concrete settings, and how these may impact on participation and the modes of engagement. However, it tends not to address the structural, institutional dynamics of democracy and political communication, and certainly the political science approach is strongest in this regard.

We have to accept and appreciate the differences between these traditions. Each can do things the others cannot, and while they together in a sense manifest a division of labor, each has its own coherence and its limitations. Democracy has entered a disturbing era, and we need open, probing theoretical constructs to guide research as well as to provide a critical stance. These three traditions offer different inflections of key concepts such as politics, citizenship, deliberation, and even democracy itself. While respecting their divergent character, we will still make better progress if we see them all as potential resources to engage with, juxtapose, and compare, rather than doggedly defend one against the others. Traces of each appear throughout this book, most obviously in Chapter 5, where I discuss civic cultures, a framework that builds on elements from all three.

THE CHAPTERS AHEAD

I begin this book in Chapter 1 with an overview of the factors contributing to the contemporary difficulties of democracy, emphasizing the specific problems of declines in political participation. There are many reasons why citizens choose not to engage in politics; while no doubt some have to do with personal character, our sociological understanding is deepened by looking at changes in the political economic structures and dynamics of late modern society, as well as key socio-cultural transformations. In other words, the character of democracy is changing because its basic preconditions are in evolution. In the era of neoliberal global capitalism, the traditional tensions between market logics and democratic principles become more acute. The governments of nation-states have less maneuverability; real societal power drifts increasingly to the private corporate sector and thereby resides beyond democratic accountability. Also, economist modes of rationality

permeate many sectors of society, undercutting democratic values and procedures. The formal political arena has in turn become constricted, offering fewer opportunities for meaningful participation, and thereby engendering disengagement.

At the socio-cultural levels, such long-term trends as the loosening of shared cultural frameworks, the weakening of traditional institutions of socialization, the ongoing processes of individualization, and the growth of network modes of social relations have contributed to further alter the conditions of democracy. These developments usher in new frames of references and life horizons, in which the traditional forms of political organization and mobilization hold less appeal. At the same time, we see new forms of political participation arising, in the extra-parliamentarian domain. The newer ITCs figure prominently here, and, as I take up in Chapters 7 and 8, they are contributing to a reconfiguration of political life – though it is still unclear if this will be sufficient to reconstruct democracy. If nothing else, however, these developments signal altered modes of participation and newer notions of what constitutes politics and the political.

A key feature of the socio-cultural evolutions is found in the developments within the media landscape, the theme of Chapter 2. The massive growth in media outlets; the policies of deregulation and the intensifying of conglomerate structures in the media industries; and the increasing globalization of media organizations, practices, and flows are all part of these developments. Not least, digitalization of the media generally, and the Internet revolution in all its ongoing permutations, signals profound alterations for the circumstances of democracy and participation. Journalism as traditionally understood has reached a historical turning point, while even the access to news does not in itself promote participation. This is because many citizens perceive as too remote the possibility of making some meaningful political connection to the prevailing forms of democracy. Concurrently, organized politics itself is undergoing change via the influx of new actors and new strategies of political communication, for example, as manifested by the doctors of spin. In the wake of all of these changes, we see realignments taking place between the major actors of political and economic elites, citizens, and the media, further reconfiguring the terrain of late modern democracy.

With Chapter 3, I enter into a more detailed discussion about democracy from the standpoint of citizenship and civic agency. I conceptually probe the notion of citizenship, underscoring that this has become an arena for new theoretical developments. The notion of achieved citizens,

something beyond the received, formal status, is an important opening, and leads us forward to the idea of citizenship as a form of social enactment, that is, as civic agency. I suggest some of civic identity is a precondition for such agency, and I look to the traditions of republicanism and civil society and public spheres to see how we might formulate civic agency as something that has its grounding in everyday horizons. Civic identities emerge through doing, through experiences in both the public and private spheres of life.

Further, in Chapter 4, I delve into the concepts of engagement and participation, underscoring that engagement, as subjective involvement, can be seen as a prerequisite, a starting point, for participation. Participation, in turn, usually takes communicative forms. Further, to understand engagement and participation at the level of identity and agency, we must usher in the affective dimension and admit that politics requires passion, in the sense of intense involvement, even if liberal democratic theory tends to cling to visions of pure rationality. Passion does not exclude rationality but works in tandem with it; it is neither a threat nor a guarantee for making the right political decisions, only a necessary ingredient for engagement.

In looking at the forms of democratic participation normally encouraged, I argue we should take a very broad view. Voting is but one, albeit crucial, mode. There are many others, and many of them make use of a variety of communication skills. Today, deliberation is at times heralded as the fundamental way for citizens to participate in democracy. I suggest that deliberation, in its formal guise, is very suited to specific situations, notably when decisions are about to be made. However, its excessive emphasis on rationality and its problematic assumptions about equal footing in regard to social power and communicative competence put limits on its utility as a model for general civic participation. I propose instead that we treat civic talk in a broader manner, allowing for how political topics may even unexpectedly emerge in everyday conversations, and how initially private topics can move to the public, political realm. Through performative civic practices the nonpolitical can become proto-political, which in turn can develop into the political. The political, in turn, can develop into formal politics.

In Chapter 5, I pull together many of these analytic threads to develop a framework to help analyze and understand civic identities: They require the support of larger, pluralistic civic cultures to flourish. I model civic cultures as comprising six dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices/skills, and identities. Civic cultures, to be viable

and serve as resources for participation, must have taken for granted anchoring in everyday life, in the life-world. They are shaped by many social factors, including power relations, economics, schooling, and not least the media. The model is normative in the sense that it suggests that these features need be present for participation to emerge – and for democracy to function. At the same time, each of the dimensions offers a starting point for empirical investigations.

Chapter 6 takes up television and popular culture, which are compelling sites of engagement. With the help of the civic cultures framework, I examine how television's media logics, especially visuals, invite engagement through pleasure, and how this has from the start set up a force-field within television news. While television news has obvious limitations in terms of contributing to a public sphere in Habermas' terms, I suggest that we need to look beyond these strict parameters. Television, through its popular programming, offers many opportunities for audiences to "work through" a vast array of issues in regard to basic values and social visions in many areas. While popular television can hardly be described as a source for progressive social inspiration, and ideological boundaries are seldom clearly ruptured, across time one can see important shifts in popular perceptions taking place. Its significance for politics should therefore not be dismissed.

This line of reasoning leads us into the broader debates regarding politics and popular culture, and I find compelling the arguments that see a porous boundary between these domains. Popular culture offers spaces where other kinds of knowledge can arise and take on political relevance, as well as opportunities to develop trust and versions of civic identities. It invites us to engage in many issues, sometimes very explicitly formulated, at other times in more diffuse ways, often making them personally meaningful. While popular culture adds to the symbolic terrain of politics, it of course cannot simply replace the more established arenas. Yet, a grasp of its important relevance for politics is central for how we make sense of contemporary democracy.

The final two chapters take up the Internet in broad terms, beginning with the debates around its significance for politics. Chapter 7 explores various attributes of the Internet and their potential for facilitating civic agency. While there is much that speaks in favor of the net's positive role in this regard, the media logics of the net also suggest that we retain some reservations: The Internet does not offer a speedy technological cure to the ills of democracy. At the same time, it has contributed dramatically to how political communication gets done, as well as to the ways in

which participation can take place. The civic affordances the net makes available are altering traditional party politics, but most impressively they have expanded the potential for alternative forms of political participation. The ever-developing, inexpensive, and easy-to-use tools, together with the network character of the social relations it engenders, open up a new chapter in the history of democracy. The net represents the emergence of a nonmarket, peer-produced alternative to corporate mass media, yet it remains unclear as to what extent its potential can be developed. There are a number of issues and reservations we need to keep in mind, but at present, the net remains an exciting democratic utility.

The final chapter, 8, charts some of the uses and implications of the Internet in three illustrative contexts: journalism, EU NGOs, and the alter-globalization movement. I indicate the importance of these developments for the various dimensions of civic cultures, while at the same time keeping an eye on realistic limits. In each of the three cases, the Internet must be understood within a larger interplay of media, institutional, social, and cultural factors that impact on the character of democracy. The Internet is unquestionably an invigorating asset for political participation, even if it cannot alter the basic factors that currently plague democracy. Analytically, the Internet, and the media generally, not only play a decisive role in shaping participation, but also, from the perspective of civic cultures, offer empirical starting points for illuminating the civic dynamics of democracy.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In writing about democracy, I am for the most part referring to Western democracies – and their problems – though I try to situate them in larger, global contexts; most of my references are to the United States and the UK.

The turbulent evolution of the media landscape results in some conceptual issues. The traditional mass media have increasingly gone online, and there is a growing use of interactive technologies between audiences and mass media formats. Thus, the distinction between mass and interactive media is becoming less tenable. Yet it can still be of use in making some general distinctions within media, and I generally adhere to it, with modifications where appropriate: The nonpolitical can become proto-political, moving on to the political and formal politics, through performative civic practices.