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'Audiences, public knowledge and citizenship in democratic states: preliminary thoughts on a conceptual framework'

Particip@tions Volume 3, Issue 2 **Special Edition** (November 2006)

Audiences, public knowledge and citizenship in democratic states: preliminary thoughts on a conceptual framework

Abstract

This essay attempts to present a theoretical frame with which to examine media audiences in relation to participation in practices of deliberative democracy. Crucial to this, it is argued, are the ideas of mediated knowledge and representation and inequality of access to symbolic resources and cultural capital, both of which are essential to the conception of democratic dialogue and debate that constitute public spheres. These ideas are explored using a hermeneutic notion of the public sphere, and are illustrated through a brief examination of consumerism and citizenship in contemporary India.

Key words: participatory democracy; hermeneutics; public knowledge; heteroglossia; cultural capital

The media are centrally implicated in discussions of the functioning of contemporary democracies. Most studies on the role of the media in democratic societies have focussed on debates surrounding notions of the public sphere, media texts as the site of contestation and conflict, and the ideals of public service broadcasting as opposed to commercial media. This take is not restricted to the Euro-American context, but also incorporate other regions, including developing societies (recent examples include Cohen (2005), Hackett and Zhao (2005), Hyden, G et al (2002), Kitley (2003)). These are crucial interventions that continue to make very significant contributions to the on-going debates. However, the audience perspective remains relatively under-explored in such studies (one of the exceptions here is Madianou (2005)). This essay is a preliminary attempt at bringing to the discussion the audience, by way of refocussing the arguments on media and democracy along the lines of citizenship, the audience-

public, and public knowledge.

Barnett (2003) explores the wider implications of forms of governmental and disciplinary power for media audiences. He sees the media as 'crucial sites for contested struggles over the conditions for the formation of new subjectivities' (p.102), and argues that a crucial component of this politics is 'the production of knowledge through which audiences are made knowable.' Significant for him is the knowledge *of* audiences, however spatially dispersed they may be, which challenges the notion of them as completely autonomous, and presents them as 'objects of policy in public and private media institutions.' (*Ibid*). The knowledge of audiences contributes, for him, to the governing of media audiences, 'characterised both by an acknowledgement of a high degree of autonomy of dispersed subjects, and by a countervailing imperative to protect audiences, not least from their own worst inclinations.' He argues that in contemporary neo-liberal socio-cultural contexts this ambivalence is demonstrated in the dual treatment of audiences: on the one hand as embodying consumer sovereignty that underpins privatisation and commercialisation and media liberalisation, and on the other hand a simultaneous attempt to resuscitate conservative values and regulatory regimes that promote the 'protection' of citizens from the perceived excesses of media representations. The implied or overt moral imperative that underlies such conservative agendas, in particular those relating to sex and/or violence, has been explored in other studies, for instance Barker, Arthurs and Harindranath (2001). What is significant in the present context is Barnett's concern regarding the governance of audiences in neo-liberal moral regulation that seeks to simultaneously celebrate their perceived autonomy as evidence of consumer 'freedom'. Implicated in this formulation is the idea that consumer sovereignty is directly related to identity formation. The knowledge *of* the audience consumption practices therefore becomes crucial for both commercial enterprises as well as governmental organizations. Accordingly, research data on audiences is seen as contributing to their governance and regulation.

In this essay I want to realign the focus on audience and knowledge to take into account the central role of public knowledge in the formation and functioning of democratic societies. This essay attempts to explore the relations between the media and citizenship from the perspective of audiences, in particular the ways in which discrepancies in cultural capital impact upon citizenship as an active engagement in civil society. This requires, it will be argued, a hermeneutic conception of audience participation. The main theoretical arguments in this essay will be based on research into the diversity of audience responses to documentary programmes in India, which will be presented alongside arguments relating to television and consumerism in contemporary India. The 'consumer-citizen' is a useful concept with which to negotiate the complex entanglements that constitute current formations of national political culture, and India presents a particularly interesting case study as through the 1990s

and until the 2004 elections it navigated the precarious waters of economic liberalisation simultaneously with the rise of Hindu fundamentalist politics.

Citizenship requirements for democratic participation

In reformulating the question of audiences and democratic citizenship I draw on Murdock’s (1999) examination of public discourse and cultural citizenship, in which he negotiates the complex territory of identity, media, and consumerism. Murdock defines the fundamental prerogative of citizenship as *‘the right to participate fully in social life with dignity and without fear, and to help formulate the forms it might take in the future.’* (p.8; emphasis in the original). The formations of citizenship in contemporary, market-oriented societies are for him complicated by the apparent paradox between liberty and fraternity, or what Tocqueville referred to as constituting the tension between empathy and mutuality on the one hand, and competitive individualism on the other. The paradox inherent in multicultural liberal democratic states has been identified by Mouffe (2000) as symptomatic of the antagonism intrinsic to the values that constitute such states: ‘on the one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty.’ (p.3). One of the consequences, for Mouffe, is the creation of a barrier that identifies those that belong to the ‘demos’ – ‘us’, as against those who do not – ‘them’. This, combined with the fact that in liberal democracies limits are imposed on the exercise of the sovereignty of the populace, brings to the fore the question of representation and the assertion of cultural difference.

To Murdock, the right to participate in formations of democratic societies includes the rights of expression constituted by the rights of listening as well as of speaking. Given that contemporary politics ‘is increasingly centred on the politics of identity – the struggle over forms of belonging, loyalty and solidarity’, (p.8), the burgeoning of identities within contemporary cultures ‘poses particular problems’, specifically the limits to free expression in domains of public discourse. As primary arenas of public discourse, he argues, the media ought to be concerned with the complex negotiations implied in the politics of difference. This is further compounded by current cultural politics that revolve around the central figure of the consumer: ‘the notion that identity and fulfilment can be purchased in the marketplace, and that the good life is to be found through total immersion in the world of goods.’ (p.10). He sees this promotion of private spending as undermining political participation, and the privileging of life styles as personal choices as undermining citizenship by negating ‘any attempt to arrive at a conception of the “common good” based on the negotiations of differences in their full complexity.’ (p. 10). The dynamics of capitalism preclude the arbitration of the tension

between consumer sovereignty and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship that are fundamental to the requirements of a functioning democracy.

Murdock's argument is central to the examination of audiences as participating citizens in a democracy, intrinsic to which is the notion of social and political inclusion that enables and encourages participation. The two basic requirements for this participation are access to material and symbolic resources, and public knowledge, including, as we shall see, knowledge of the functioning of the state. His thesis regarding the proliferation of identities and the mediation of difference is particularly relevant in the current, post 9-11 political climate, in which citizenship in multicultural societies, both in the West and elsewhere, is in complex ways being negotiated alongside concerns regarding national security. The politics of difference involves, consequently, much more than the expressions of diverse cultural and moral discourses, as it entails perceptions of and by ethnic minorities in relation to dominant discourses on terror. This underlines even more strongly the centrality of the media and the contestations over public knowledge. The idea of audiences as active participants in democratic discourse therefore, assumes a particular resonance. In this respect Murdock's argument regarding state intervention becomes even more important: '[I]n addition to guaranteeing basic material conditions for participation, full citizenship also required access to relevant symbolic resources and the competences to use them effectively.' (p. 11).

It is worthwhile making a slight detour here to include in our contention regarding the media, audience participation, and public knowledge Benhabib's (2002) proposal on participatory democracy. The notion of participatory or deliberative democracy is a central component of discussions of the media and the public sphere, which we do not have to go into in great detail here. What is most relevant in Benhabib's formulation is her plea for dialogue as fundamental to democratic practice. In the place of what she considers the unproductive explorations of the alleged tension between relativism (which privileges the local and the particular) and universalism, which promote theses of incommensurability and untranslatability, Benhabib pleads the case for a dialogue between cultures considered not as complete and coherent wholes, but as unstable, hybrid, and 'polyvocal'. 'Politically, the right to cultural expression needs to be grounded upon, rather than considered an alternative to, universally recognised citizenship rights.' (p.26). Benhabib's vision includes a participatory democracy involving a *dialogic relationship* between different perspectives inspired by diverse cultural formations and value systems. In the place of an unproductive dichotomy opposing an unexamined universalism to relativist particularism her recommendation for addressing the problem of equality is a conversation among cultural communities with equal powers of enunciation. Benhabib's argument is clearly significant in terms of debates on multiculturalism and representation, raising as it does questions regarding cultural

politics and the issue of who speaks for whom and in what context (Harindranath, 2006).

Audiences, public knowledge, and citizenship

In her attempt to transcend the unproductive binarism of ‘audiences’ and ‘publics’, Livingstone (2005) argues that audiences ‘sustain a modest and often ambivalent level of critical interpretation, drawing upon – and thereby reproducing – a somewhat ill-specified, at times inchoate or even contradictory sense of identity or belonging which motivates them towards but does not wholly enable the kinds of collective and direct action expected of a public. That after all, is the point: it is precisely such context-dependent yet under-determined, plural and hybrid identities, understandings, practices that must and do shape people’s engagement with others, in private and public.’ (pp. 31-32). She suggests that a third concept – the ‘civic’ – allows for grounded, empirical research on phenomena such as gender politics and the relevance of talk show debates. Crucially, it enables the re-conceptualisation of audiences as ‘citizen-viewers’, as Corner (1995) has argued.

As Livingstone usefully demonstrates, Dahlgren’s (2003) argument regarding the productive use of the concept of the ‘civic’ to redraw questions of political communication to include audience participation is valuable here. Dahlgren sees the ‘civic’ as ‘a reservoir of the pre- or non-political that becomes actualised at particular moments when politics arises.’ (p.155). Crucial for Dahlgren are the ‘cultural factors that can impinge on the actions and communications of people in their roles as (multifarious) citizens’ (p.152), and consequently, the empirical study of audience life-worlds, including quotidian experiences and cultural contexts becomes relevant.

Public participation in deliberative democracy presumes a knowledgeable citizenry. In an earlier exploration of media and citizenship, Dahlgren (1995) underlines the significance of the concepts of civil society and citizenship to the analysis of the role of the media in democracy. Central to linking these two concepts, for him, is the process of television reception. Civil society offers for him ‘a way to conceptually gather up the sites of reception and recontextualize them to a larger theoretic horizon which has relevance for both democratic theory and the public sphere.’ (p.120). On the other hand he argues, the category of ‘audience’ alone is far too media centric and consequently inadequate for the examination of the public sphere: ‘the public sphere requires “publics”, in the sense of interacting social agents. The category of audience becomes too constricted in this regard. We need to move, in our theoretic vistas, from audience members to citizens.’ (p.120). While reception research continues to provide useful insights into the socio-cultural aspects of television viewing, he recommends the

reformulation of audience activity and viewership as a 'potential moment of citizenship,' as it allows the productive exploration of media reception in its everyday context and thereby its relation to civil society. This is because 'television has a significant impact on the public/private distinction. It scrambles the distinction in such a way that reception as an activity potentially transcends the geography of the private by discursively positioning the viewer as a citizen, as a member of the public.' (pp. 123-24). Dahlgren's thesis raises several issues that are pertinent to the recasting of audiences as 'publics' and citizens, crucial to which are the concept of public knowledge, and the centrality of the access to symbolic resources, of cultural capital.

Entangled in the network of audience, knowledge, and symbolic resources is the politics and experience of difference. Morley (1999) argues succinctly that 'Knowledge is always a matter of class, race, and gender positioning, among other things.' (p.139). As demonstrated in Harindranath (1998, 2000), the other complicating factor, in particular in developing societies, is university education, which acts as a conduit to certain kinds of knowledge, predispositions and expectations in relation to the media, as well as to perceptions of democratic rights and the role of the state. Madianou (2005), arguing the case for the significance of the distinction between comprehension and incomprehension of news media, supports Morley's (1999) argument that audiences' failure to make 'dominant' readings of television news need to be distinguished between the lack, on the one hand of specific forms of media literacy, and on the other of cultural resources with which to initiate alternative perspectives on events presented in news reports.

Madianou (2005) underscores the importance of the notion of 'experience' to her study, arguing that the diverse perceptions and evaluations by different people of different events promote a revaluation of ideas and perspectives, which in turn contributes to a reformulation of experience. This circularity between experience, interpretation and re-evaluation is, as we shall see later, a central feature of Gadamerian hermeneutics. For the time being however, it is worth noting Madianou's point regarding experience as providing a 'personal dimension' to the notion of collective identity.

The concept of "experience" has had a chequered history, in particular in relation to how it informs agency, identity, and resistance. The crux of the debate is around the relevance and validity of "immediate", that is, not mediated experience, whether or not that constitutes the basis for alternative narratives, or whether, on the contrary, emphasising lived experience portends essentialist constructions of identity, which approximate forms of ethno-nationalism and tribalism. And therein lies the dilemma: recourse to allegedly prediscursive, concrete experience, while it provides the vocabulary for cultural and collective identity, is simultaneously susceptible to the vagaries of fundamentalist politics. As we saw earlier, Benhabib's (2002) contention regarding the requirements of a dialogic relationship between diverse communities in deliberative democracy presumes a willingness by such communities to forestall any attempt at presenting themselves as unequivocally unitary and closed, which leads to

an unproductive form of relativism. Madianou too, is aware of this risk. She argues however, that it is important to recognise that differences in perceptions and experiences of events, far from being arbitrary, are closely tied up with both material and symbolic structures and resources. 'Resources, the symbolic and material means through which people make sense of the world, are an important parameter in the mediation process.... Resources include education and access to media and information.' (2005, p.139).

If public knowledge is a constituent of democratic participation, and knowledge and interpretation of the media as the arena of public discourse are related to experience, then audience evaluations of what constitutes valid knowledge become crucial. Livingstone's (1999) assertion that what audiences gain from specific media genres derives from what is considered valuable and how that locates them in relation to the text: 'If experts are considered to be lacking in personal experience while ordinary people are seen as authentic, the value of what each says will be regarded differently than it will be by those who consider that experts are more credible and more knowledgeable than ordinary people.' (92-93). This underpins one of the research questions in the project that she describes, "'Whose knowledge is being (re)produced?'" (p.94), which is an indispensable component of the exploration of the functioning of media in democratic states, in particular issues concerning mediated knowledge and its regulation, as well as its relations with the private and the public, with the public sphere, and with cultural and political elites and marginalized communities.

Consumption and public participation

As Canclini (2001) has argued in his examination of consumers and citizens, research on audiences has contributed to the reconceptualisation of the audience-text relations, which has paved the way to conceiving communication as being not one of domination, but a much more complex '*collaboration and transaction* between both parties.' (p.38; emphasis in the original), as against the earlier conception of media consumption as being determined by corporations and texts. This is a well-known and established conception of audience activity, although, as argued earlier, celebrations of audience autonomy do occasionally go to the other extreme, not taking into account the broader socio-cultural dimensions of audience engagements with the media.

What is specifically of interest to us, however, is Canclini's point regarding the study of consumption 'as a marker of difference and distinction between classes and groups,' which 'has led to a focus on the *symbolic and aesthetic aspects of the rationality of consumption*. There is a logic to the construction of *status* markers and in the ways of communicating them.' (p.39). Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and Appadurai, Canclini advocates the notion that in contemporary liberal societies social relations are

constructed more in terms of the struggle over the means of symbolic distinction rather than for the means of production and the mere gratification of material needs. This permits him to reformulate the dichotomy of state and civil society in terms of reconsidering simultaneously both policies as well as forms of participation, which to him requires understanding ourselves as both citizens and consumers.

This reformulation, in turn, involves a reconceptualisation of the idea of the public sphere: 'Neither subordinated to the state nor dissolved in civil society, it is reconstituted time and again in the tension between both.' (p.154). He is, consequently, sympathetic to Alejandro's (1993) efforts to conceive of the public sphere by taking into account not only Habermas's well-known thesis on it, but also Bakhtin's notion of 'heteroglossia'. Alejandro's hermeneutic re-evaluation of the public sphere builds on and expands both Gadamer's hermeneutics and Bakhtin's assessment of language: the public sphere is 'a space of heteroglossia', 'a field of competing traditions and languages', and 'a terrain in which meanings and traditions are enforced but, in the process, new forces can pose different meanings or emphases ... thus challenging existing ones.' (p.206). Canclini's and Alejandro's reformulations of the public sphere is useful here in several ways: they underline the necessity of dialogue in a democratic public sphere, thereby supporting both Habermas's notion of the (counterfactual) ideal speech situation as well as Benhabib's forceful argument for the case of a dialogic relationship between different communities as a requirement for participatory democracy; they recognise the dimension of power inherent in the public sphere, which is predicated upon unequal access to symbolic resources and distinctions in cultural capital; and finally, they, in particular Alejandro's exploration of hermeneutics and citizenship, allows for the exploration of audience activity through Gadamerian hermeneutics, as revealed in the phrase 'field of competing traditions and languages'. The latter, in particular, enables an assessment of the ways in which cultural capital, access to education, media literacy, the every day, and socio-cultural contexts impact on the ways in which audiences interpret and respond to mediated knowledge as citizens and how that may have consequences for their participation in democratic dialogue and deliberation.

As I have argued elsewhere (Harindranath, 1998, 2000), Gadamer's (1975, 1976) hermeneutics emphasises the role of the fundamental 'thrownness' of human life – that is, our ordinary, everyday situation – as well as its temporality and historicity, in which understanding and interpretation are inescapably embedded. In other words, the audience-citizen's historicity, their specific socio-historical and cultural context, is crucial to their engagement with mediated forms of knowledge. Gadamer considers this historicity to be the consequence of both a biographical past as well as a cultural past, which both fashion the 'hermeneutic situation' of the audience, that is, the context of

audience's interpretive activity. It is important to recognise that to Gadamer, this 'boundedness' of understanding by specific socio-cultural conditions is not a negative phenomenon but quite the reverse: it is the very ground, fertile and enabling, that makes understanding possible. He gives this enabling condition the name 'prejudice' or 'prejudgement'. These are both inevitable and indispensable to understanding, and are fashioned by the 'tradition' to which one belongs – a tradition that is bound up with one's own biographical and socio-cultural history. Crucially for him, understanding involves the anticipation of meaning of the whole text based on prior knowledge of the nature of its constituents, as for instance in its generic features. He refers to this as 'the horizon of expectations', a set of assumptions that we take to the text. These assumptions however, are not fixed, but are modified constantly as we encounter texts. In other words, we continually revise our expectations of the whole text on the basis of our understanding of parts of it. It is useful to note here that this idea can be applied to other situations: the culturally, historically situated set of 'prejudices' also undergo constant revision. In other words, we constantly revise our cultural resources – and therefore our prejudices and prejudgements – as we encounter new experiences in the form of real and/or mediated events.

To extend this further, cultural difference can be construed as specific hermeneutic 'horizons' that contribute to differences in the engagement of the audience-citizen with mediated and public knowledge. Notions of deliberative democracy as facilitated by the media therefore presume dialogic participation between different 'horizons' and 'prejudices'. The public sphere, as 'a space of heteroglossia' and 'a field of competing traditions and languages' ought to provide the necessary means for such dialogue, premised on an ideal speech situation. This involves addressing the inequality of resources, cultural and symbolic, that underlies unequal relations in power, and constitutes the difference between the elites and the marginal.

Sen (1999) has argued that '[d]emocracy has to be seen as creating a set of opportunities, and the use of these opportunities calls for an analysis of a different kind, dealing with the practice of democratic and political rights.' (p.154). Both the availability and the use of such opportunities, however, is predicated upon state intervention to promote equal access to public knowledge in terms of policies that countervail the logic of the market and oppose the values reinforcing consumer practice as a form of individual identity formation.

An Indian case study

To take the example of the complicitous relations between the media, the market, and Hindu extremism, Rajagopal's (2001) well known study of the complex ways in which

Indian television was the site for the revival of Hindu nationalism as well as the espousal of neoliberalism and the apparent merits of globalisation is perhaps the most comprehensive analysis of this seemingly contradictory development in contemporary Indian political culture. Others, such as Nandy et al (1997), Ludden (1996), Jaffrelot (1999) provide extensive and occasionally provocative analyses of the emergence and rise of Hindu nationalism within the democratic process in India. In terms of the media, the market, and religious nationalism in the context of globalisation, however, Fernandes (2000) and Chakravarty and Gooptu (2000) are exemplary attempts at tracing the complicated lines of connection. Fernandes is interested in shifting the terms of debate on the apparent failures of the state in order to examine 'how the nation is being reformed through the processes of globalization to the question of how the production of "the global" occurs through the nationalist imagination.' (p.611). The transformation of national political culture from the post-independence Nehruvian vision that included industrialisation and a steadfastly secular state to the economically liberalised contemporary India is for her marked by the deepening of the culture of consumption. In a culture that has subscribed increasingly to the visible indicators of wealth in the form of 'foreign' products, the adoption of the global within the purview of the national is evident, Fernandes argues, in the 'visual representations of newly available commodities [that] provide a lens through which we can view the ways in which meanings attached to such commodities weave together narratives of nationhood and development with the production of middle-class identity' in India (p.615). Her essay presents a convincing analysis of television and print advertisements of consumer goods that draw on images and narratives from a nationalist and Hindu tradition as instances of advertising strategies that successfully combine the global, in the form of the products that they sell, with the idiom of the national. The conclusion that 'the aesthetic of the commodity does not merely serves as a passive reflector of wider social and cultural processes but instead becomes a central site in which the Indian nation is re-imagined' (p.619) presents a different conception of the apparent paradox of economic liberalisation and cultural nationalism that has been a characteristic of contemporary India, in which both developments combine to produce a particular national imaginary. Chakravarty and Gooptu (2000) see the consolidation of Hindu nationalism in India as an antidote to a presumed perils of subsumption by 'Western culture, on the one hand, and on the other the apparent threat to national security presented by the Muslim 'other'. However, this essay too, focuses on the mediation of consumption and consumerism linked to specific constructions of family and national community. 'With the market driving the growth of the media', they argue, 'and the middle class forming its primary target audience, not surprisingly, media productions not only drew upon, but also reproduced and magnified middle class notions of the "Hindu" nation in a bid to promote consumerism among these classes.' (p.97).

In the complex multicultural and multi-religious formation of contemporary Indian national imaginary, the construction of the Hindu consumer-citizen is a cause for concern. Related to this is the notion of the state as an imagined community, as proposed by Gupta (2000), whose ethnographic analysis encompassed the practices of lower level bureaucrats in a small town in North India and was complemented by an investigation of representations of the state in the mass media. Central to his analysis is the discourse of corruption, which he sees as 'a key arena through which the state, citizens, and other organizations and aggregations come to be imagined. Instead of treating corruption as a dysfunctional aspect of state organizations, I see it as a medium through which "the state" itself is discursively constituted.' (p.333). His focus is on 'the "multiply mediated" contexts through which the state comes to be constructed' (p.335), which included engaging with the ways in which discussions with villagers concerning the state were refracted through the lenses of both everyday encounters with corruption, as well as with mediated forms of state functions. For our concerns, what is crucial here is the ways in which this impacts upon self-perceptions among his respondents regarding their roles as citizens, and the validity of their claims. What emerges as significant in his study is the continuing marginalisation of certain communities, whose voices are absent in the public dialogues that constitute the Indian state.

As argued elsewhere (Harindranath, 2000), the results of my own study that compared interpretations of documentaries and audience evaluations of their truth claims between groups in the UK and India were strongly suggestive of the role of higher education in the diversity of interpretations between different audience groups in India. Briefly, the *similarities* between the interpretive frames used by Indian groups with higher education qualifications and those used by British audiences, and equally the *differences* between the frames used by these Indian groups and their compatriots without university education are revealing of the role of education in interpretations and evaluative judgements of media content. Evidently, the data undermine the conflation of culture with geographical or national space. Even at a preliminary level of analysis the data is indicative of the fundamental error in assuming that all Indians share the same cultural resources. On the contrary, the Indian respondents with university education share similar cultural resources – or, to use Gadamer's terms, 'historicity' and the 'hermeneutic situation' – with British groups. Consequently, what emerges as significant is not racial or national difference but difference prompted by university education. The importance of higher education as a constitutive aspect of a person's biographical history, with the potential of creating a 'culture' of its own, providing a demonstrably effective 'hermeneutic horizon' is indicative of a hybrid culture that is simultaneously removed from the local communities without university education, and bridges the gap between indigenous Indian and western cultures. The historical origins of university education in India that links them to its colonial past are not directly relevant here.

What is pertinent is the issue of how higher education in India contributes to gaining access to specific cultural and symbolic resources that amount to whether or not a person or community has a voice in the contemporary Indian polity.

In this essay I have attempted to present an argument for the refashioning of audience research in such a way that it takes into account questions concerning the media, public knowledge, and the enduring inequality of access to cultural resources that are fundamental to conceptions of deliberative democracy. Existing studies on the relations between media and democracy, with their focus on policy, texts, or ownership and control, present valuable but incomplete arguments, as they largely neglect the audience dimension. This essay is a preliminary effort at tracing the outlines of a conceptual framework with which to redress this lacuna in media research.

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Audiences, public knowledge and citizenship in democratic states: preliminary thoughts on a conceptual framework

Date:

2006

Citation:

Harindranath, R. (2006). Audiences, public knowledge and citizenship in democratic states: preliminary thoughts on a conceptual framework. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, 3(2).

Publication Status:

Published

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Title:

Audiences, public knowledge and citizenship in democratic states: preliminary thoughts on a conceptual framework

Date:

2006

Citation:

HARINDRANATH, R. (2006). Audiences, public knowledge and citizenship in democratic states: preliminary thoughts on a conceptual framework. *Participations: journal of audience and reception studies*, 3 (2)

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