

## From Letters to Tweeters: Media Communities of Opinion

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Mass media have always served as central institutions of the public sphere, providing opportunities for public debate and opinion formation. This chapter addresses the historical development of mediated forums for public participation, paying particular attention to the relationship between technological change and transformations in the role of media professionals as gatekeepers in mediated communities of opinion. It argues that successive waves of technological change have had profound consequences in terms of broadening access as well as diversifying forms, platforms and genres through which communities of opinion have taken shape. In the process, journalists and media organizations have been compelled to loosen their grip on their editorial control over the mediated expression of public opinion. This shift has taken place alongside – and in part as a result of – developments through which the ideal of interactivity and the valorization of participation have gained ever more purchase.

### **The early history of communities of opinion: Tracing the development of letters to the editor**

Early print publications – by most measures the first mass media - made little distinction between opinion and news content, and, correspondingly, between opinion pieces in the form of letters to the editor and reports on current events. In the prominent account of Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), for example, the first newspapers emerged as the organic

continuation of private newsletters. Before the advent of the steam train and the telegraph, printers relied on news arriving by postal coach or ship, and stories published in the early British and American press were often several months old. In this information-poor environment, printers and editors welcomed any publishable material. Philadelphia printer Andrew Bradford, writing in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, justified his printing of a personal letter in terms of the lack of other suitable news: “Having but few remarkable occurrences to fill up our paper at present, we believe it will not be unacceptable to our readers, to insert [sic] the following letter from a Gentleman to his Friend upon the loss of his only Daughter” (Hart 1970: 113). This dynamic encouraged the inclusion of correspondence from members of the public, sowing the seeds of the creation of communities of opinion within the pages of the newspaper.

Further, perhaps as a result of the dearth of fresh and relevant local news in print publications – news which could, for many people, be more reliably gathered through conversations and gossip in local communities as well as private letters - it was opinion writing, rather than news content, which served as the main selling point of the printing press. The emerging British political press of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century made the critical opinion essay, in the form of a letter to the editor, a centre-piece of the newspaper. For example, the *Daily Spectator* quickly became popular for its political essays, written by professional authors – including the novelist Daniel Defoe - whose contributions came in the form of anonymous letters. Early periodicals also drew on letter-writing from members of the public. “The periodical fostered [a] sense of engagement by incorporating readers’ writing [...], establishing the appearance of dialogue between editors and readers and sometimes among readers themselves,

and representing readers writing about a variety of public and private concerns” (Shevelow 1989: 44). In the United States, after an initial period of relatively bland print publications that were generally supportive of the colonial government, solicited letters quickly came to be used as a vehicle for the generation of critical debate. When Thomas Fleet took over the *Boston Weekly Rehearsal* in the 1730s, he “solicited opinion writers by inviting ‘all Gentlemen of Leisure and Capacity...to write anything of a political nature, that tends to enlighten and serve the Publick, to communicate their productions, provided they are not overlong’” (Hart 1970: 111). Letter writers to the colonial press contributed their opinions about political matters large and small, having their say on everything from the icy streets of Philadelphia to the need for more watchmen, firemen and street lights (Hart 1970: 117). As such, letters in the early newspapers – even if not premised on the strict separation between the contributions of professional writers and correspondents and “ordinary” citizens – generated a sense of a broader debate on topics of common concern.

The separation of news and opinion, and therefore of stories from letters, was integral to the slow but steady professionalization of journalism. One indication of this separation can be seen in the demarcation of letters to the editor as a distinctive genre and forum within the newspaper. *The New York Times* published its first letter to the editor five days after its first issue came out, on September 18, 1851 (Rosenthal 1971: 135). The paper sought to make its letters section “a forum for the consideration of all questions of public importance, and to that end to invite intelligent discussion from all shades of opinion” (Seigel 1972: 3-4). Since the emergence of newspaper sections specifically devoted to letters from readers, they have served as important forums for debate about the large and small issues that touch on the lives

of people in local, national and global communities. Although newspaper editors are quick to point out that narrowly local topics such as pot holes and dog-fouling in city parks top the agenda of debates on letters pages (e.g. Wahl-Jorgensen 2007), they have also functioned as important forums for debating and crystallizing the positions of key social movements, from abolitionists to women's rights (e.g. Chambers et al. 2004).

### **From print to broadcast: Talk radio and audience participation on television**

Letters sections have always served as a *constructed* community of mediated public opinion, where decisions about which letters to include and which to reject have been made on the basis of distinctive and institutionalized rules of selection, implemented by newswriters who have served as gatekeepers to guarantee the quality of contributions (Wahl-Jorgensen 2002). However, even if letters were, for a long time, the most prominent site for the creation of communities of opinion, other traditional mass media - particular radio and television – have given birth to a range of forums for mediated discussion. Audience participation in radio genres has been around as long as the medium itself, and has consistently offered a space for the representation of the public, claiming to speak for “the people“ (Loviglio 2002). For instance, the network radio program *Vox Pop*, broadcast between 1932 and 1948, engaged in an unending search for the voice of the American people by interviewing individuals in the streets, with the stated intention of “posing questions of ‘spectacular unimportance’“ (Loviglio 2002: 91). Community and shortwave radio stations have provided an important way for otherwise disenfranchised groups to gain a foothold in the public sphere (Fairchild 2001: 89; Riisman 2002). Talk radio

has been a key venue for “populist deliberation,” through which citizens may bypass the mainstream media to make their opinions heard and hold politicians to account (Page and Tannenbaum 1996, Thornborrow and Fitzgerald 2013), even if many observers have raised concerns over the incivility and intolerance often characterising the genre, as well as for the its domination by people with extreme and polarized political positions (Sobieraj and Berry 2011).

A significant and related innovation in participatory programming was that of the audience participation talk show – rising to prominence in late 1980s with programs such as Kilroy in the UK and the Oprah Winfrey show in the US – both shows broadcasting their first season in 1986. One of the first major studies of such shows, Livingstone and Lunt’s (1994) *Talk on Television*, looked at the opportunities for regular citizens to contribute to public debate, and how program makers encourage and discourage particular forms of participation. Their work demonstrated that talk shows carve out a space for “attempt to confront established power with the lived experience of ordinary people“ (Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 160). They proposed that television talk shows, by combining opportunities for personal story-telling and public debate, may “support an emancipatory public sphere“ (Livingstone and Lunt 1994: 160). Talk shows have provided a voice for marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities and lesbians and gays (Gamson 1998). They have provided audiences with both a language and an awareness “about how their personal experiences intertwine with politics on issues such as abortion and welfare“ (Shattuc 1997: 195). As such, talk shows may challenge conventional understandings of “proper“ public debate. Laura Grindstaff (2002) has suggested that power of talk shows comes from how they emotionally engage their audiences, in moments of

“joy, sorrow, rage or remorse expressed in visible, bodily terms “that are the “hallmark of the genre“ (Grindstaff 2002: 19-20). Nonetheless, because of the fact that the genre is frequently – and increasingly – focused on personal story-telling and on the public display of spectacular and sometimes violent emotion, critics of television talk shows have long worried about their cultural effects, asserting that they erode “social barriers, inhibitions and cultural distinctions” (Abt and Seesholtz 1994: 171) and could be seen as part of a trend of towards a “rude, nasty stubborn politics” (Shea and Fiorina 2012). Such criticisms take issue with the irrational and often incivil tone of discussion which may violate basic norms of conduct of conduct, and tend to focus on personal problems over matters of common concern.

These worries have only intensified with the proliferation of genres – including a greater variety of talk shows, as well as reality-based programming – based on the experiences of “ordinary people” and with a distinct emphasis on “lifestyle” issues since the late 1990s. As Lunt (2009) has pointed out, such might also be seen to contribute to a normative social order based on their articulation of the politics of identity or the “project of the self” central to reflexive modernity, even if it this does not conform to conventional understandings of the political. Indeed, the increasing place of ordinary people in the media has been theorized as a “demotic turn” which, while involving the cultivation of “ordinary celebrity” does not necessarily equate to an enhancement of broader empowerment and political participation (Turner 2010).

What talk shows, radio phone-ins and letters share, then, is the formation of *mediated* communities of opinion which generate debate on the large and small, public and private matters which preoccupy us all – and, in the process of doing so,

also foster larger “imagined communities” (Anderson 1991) of audiences who orient themselves towards these discussions and may continue them in interpersonal contexts. Platforms for opinion expression in conventional print and broadcast media – including letters to the editor, television and radio talk shows, and audience participation programmes -- have allowed editors, journalists and programme makers to shape the tone and content of mediated public debate. They have functioned as an integral part of media content – whether as a section in the newspaper or as incorporated into programming in the form of television news vox pops or programming premised on audience participation. This mode of incorporation into conventional media operation and professional practices has, however, been challenged by technological change. This, in turn, complicates the relationship between access, mediation and professional intervention in and contribution to communities of opinion.

### **Online communities of opinion, social media and public participation:**

#### **Challenging the role of news organisations as gatekeepers?**

The emergence of the internet and, subsequently, convergent forms of news content enabling greater interactivity in a proliferation of forums, genres and forms – ranging from blogs, comments and user-generated content to social media - has had profound consequences. First of all, the technological affordances of the internet have enabled greater interactivity (e.g. Kammer 2013). Starting with the earliest experiments in the 1990s and early 2000s, media organisations enabled users to comment on online stories, and the introduction of blogs also enabled further instantaneous dialogue, for the first time generating communities of opinion that could respond in real time to unfolding news events (see Steensen 2011). The

internet was welcomed with much fanfare by observers who saw it as an opportunity to “produce virtual public spheres” (Papacharissi 2002) and hence revolutionize mediated public participation. For example, proponents of radical democracy viewed the new communicative opportunities in terms of how they might be “constitutive of alternative political communities, new subject positions, new possibilities for acting in concern, and ultimately radical new democratic cultures that challenge dominant political assumptions” – including ones that might give voice to otherwise marginalized, oppressed or alternative groups in society (Dahlberg and Siapera 2007: 11-12). As discussed in further detail below, however, questions of inequality in access – or the so-called “digital divide” have always been salient among those more sceptical about the transformative potential of new technologies and the communities of opinion created by them.

Nonetheless, new technologies have certainly contributed to destabilizing power relations in the public sphere, particularly with respect to the production and distribution of content and opinion. To many, these trends began with the emergence of citizen journalism and user-generated content. User-generated content – or views, images and videos contributed by members of the public – first gained prominence after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, where eyewitnesses were able to film the disaster as it unfolded, providing news organisations with unprecedented immediacy in their coverage (Allan, 2009). In the UK, the 7/7 bombings in July 2005 represented the watershed for “accidental journalism” carried out by ordinary citizens (Boaden 2008, Allan 2013). The use of audience materials in the context of major breaking news events, particularly natural disasters, was focused on information provision,



rather than the sharing of opinion – even if such “citizen witnessing” has always taken place from a particular subject position which implies, at the very least, an investment and an interest in current affairs (Allan 2013, see also Andén-Papadopoulos and Pantti 2011). News organisations’ heady embrace of opinion-based user-generated content over the next few years heralded the increasing prominence and centrality ascribed to such audience participation, which was seen as a useful venue for generating public debate on major news stories in ways that might both enhance public participation, bolster relationships with audiences, and generate sources for follow-ups and future stories. At the same time, critics have also suggested that the rise of user-generated content represents the nefarious outsourcing of newswork to members of the public (e.g. Jenkins and Deuze 2008).

The increasing use of audience materials in the conventional media worked in tandem with the creation of new platforms and forums where audiences could participate by contributing news and opinion – leading to the rise of “citizen journalism” (e.g. Allan and Thorsen 2009). In a keynote speech and subsequent blog post on the phenomenon published in 2008, the BBC’s then-director of news Helen Boaden, framed the growing awareness of and resources shifted in the direction of citizen journalism within the corporation in terms of audience relations:

The biggest challenge for us is about our relationship to the people who matter most - our audiences. It's about capturing and keeping their hearts and minds. And for audiences who want to join in, that means including them in the process of making the news. Our journalism is now fully embracing the experiences of our audiences, sharing their stories, using their knowledge and hosting their opinions; we're acting as a conduit between different parts of our

audience; and we're being more open and transparent than we have ever been.[...] [W]ith blogs in particular - but also podcasts and videoblogs - the ability of the public to express opinion in public has exploded - especially in the USA - and they no longer need to be "hosted" by broadcasters. (Boaden 2008)

Boaden's position is typical of journalists' complex orientation towards the proliferation of forums for the sharing of content and opinion: The promise of new platforms as an unprecedented opportunity to connect with audiences has often been a key driver for both commercial and public service media. At the same time, for news media hosting – and therefore taking responsibility for – such spaces, they also require extensive vigilance. Concerns about the monitoring, moderation and quality control of online forums have remained central for news organisations and have, over time, led to more careful constraints and limitations on spaces for discussion, with the closing down of discussion boards and comments originally hosted by broadcasters and newspapers (Wahl-Jorgensen, Wardle and Williams 2010).<sup>i</sup> Such concerns highlight a contemporary twist on an apparent paradox that has always plagued sites for public debate and opinion formation: They are viewed as central to democratic practice and the formation of a public sphere for discussion of matters of common concern, and as such as a key responsibility of media organisations. But their management requires extensive resources, and individuals participating in discussion through such venues are not necessarily reflective of the profile or views of a broader public.

On the other hand, the shift also challenges conventional power relations of the public sphere, where participation in the form of opinion expression is no longer the

preserve of mainstream media. Instead, participants have been granted a greater autonomy over the production and distribution of opinion, and the associated creation of opinion communities. Media organisations, which have tended to function as the “gatekeepers,” have now become “gatewatchers” or curators, sorting through and publicising information available elsewhere on the internet (Bruns 2005: 2). This gradual shift has taken away control from the media organisations which previously served as the locus of public debate and participation. This has worried observers for several reasons: First, some suggest that the quality of participation suffers from the conditions of anonymity and lack of face-to-face interaction which has meant that social norms of civility are more easily violated online. Further, there is concern that the sheer proliferation of sites for public discussion has led to the fragmentation and individualisation of debate (e.g. Papacharissi 2002). Relatedly, this proliferation raises questions about a potential trade-off between the quantity and quality of opinion expression.

The past few years have also seen the rise of hyperlocal blogs which often include both opinion-based content alongside local news content, and also offer opportunities for debate. Though the emergence of such hyperlocal news sites has been broadly welcomed in the context of a crisis in local news provision, “where local newspapers are operating on skeleton staffs, where they’ve already been closed down, or where there was never much mainstream media to speak of in the first place” (Williams et al. 2012), it also represents a deprofessionalization of journalism and, relatedly, of the emerging curatorial role of news media in communities of opinion.

The shift in the locus of control over communities of opinion has been further consolidated with the birth of social media. Since the mid-2000s, social media or Web 2.0 venues such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook have enabled users to share their own content independently of the intervention of media organisations. This development has been seen to offer the promise of a “networked citizen-centred perspective providing opportunities to connect the private sphere of autonomous political identity to a multitude of chosen political spaces” (Loader and Mercea 2012: 2; see also Benkler 2006). Yet, there has been considerable debate about whether the interactivity of the online world – from the first wave of blogs and discussion boards to the second wave of social media - has transformed the nature of democratic debate. If early observers of the online world expressed great hopes for the emancipatory potential of new technologies, these hopes have been echoed by the later wave of social media enthusiasts, who have pointed to the radically decentring and distributive nature of Web 2.0 forums dedicated to the sharing of opinion and information by “ordinary people” (Loader and Mercea 2012). But utopian dreams have been tempered by evidence that consecutive innovations in participatory forums have not actually transformed democratic practice for a variety of reasons. First of all, the digital divide, which means that some groups and individuals are systematically underrepresented in online debates due to lack of access or the cultural capital, time and interest required to participate, means that the promise of egalitarian deliberation has never been realized. In the contemporary ecology of communities of opinion, there is evidence instead of an “unequal spread of social ties with a few giant nodes” and a limited number of influential voices (Loader and Mercea 2012: 4). As Loader and Mercea (2012: 4) observed:

Instead of facilitating an increasing host of active citizen-users, social media perhaps more typically facilitates [sic] online shopping, gossip and file-sharing between friends already known to each other.

This analysis points to two concerns: First of all, that much of the discussion that takes place in social media is not about political matters, but instead based on consumption and the sharing of personal information. This is consistent with longer-standing concerns about the tension between the discussion of matters of common concern in communities of opinion, and the actual practice of discussions focused on the “project of the self,” emerging through personal experience and story-telling (Lunt 2009). Secondly, the observation that discussion in social media takes place “between friends already known to each other” taps into broader issues around the selective communities of opinion fostered by online communities in general, and social media in particular. The preference for interacting and carrying out discussion with like-minded individuals is not a new development brought about by technological change: As Diana Mutz has demonstrated, people, if given any choice, will systematically opt for political discussion with others of a similar ideological inclination, “secure in the knowledge that their basic values and political goals [a]re shared” (Mutz 2006: 16). Nonetheless, these trends might be strengthened by technological change. As Pariser (2011) has warned, the selective communities of social media combine with the sophisticated personalisation algorithms of the big industry players, including Facebook, Google and Yahoo, to generate a “filter bubble” (Pariser 2011) – our own unique information universe, through which we “receive mainly news that is pleasant, familiar and confirms our beliefs.” He demonstrates how our “past interests will determine what we are exposed to in the future, leaving less room for the unexpected encounters that spark creativity,

innovation and the democratic exchange of ideas” (Pariser 2011: Kindle edition location 12). Put differently, the increasingly personalized, targeted and tailored nature of interactions in today’s media ecology may mean that there is, in fact, limited opportunity to participate in a broader debate involving all stakeholders, regardless of specific personal interests or political views.

In terms of conventional understandings of political activity, it appears that already-engaged groups, including activists, social movements, political parties, have benefited from and made great use of social media (Christensen and Bengtsson). Though the jury is still out on whether they are “replicating or challenging existing imbalances” (Mascheroni 2012: 222), most research has found “at best a limited effect on the propensity to be actively involved in political affairs” (Christensen and Bengtsson 2012: 133), though some evidence suggests that otherwise disengaged citizens may be mobilized by new opportunities (Christensen and Bengtsson 2012).

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that mass media have always played a key role in the formation of communities of opinion, but that successive waves of technological change – particularly the invention of the internet and social media – have taken away some of the control over such spaces from conventional news organisations. The proliferation of expressive opportunities has resulted in the fragmentation of public debate and the increasing personalization of participation – trends which generate both opportunities and challenges. Though some evidence suggests that emerging forums have empowered marginalized and previously disengaged groups and citizens, social inequalities continue to be reflected in communities of opinion,

even as journalists are no longer the main gatekeepers of the public sphere, and the power to determine which topics should be on the agenda, and how they should be discussed has been radically redistributed.

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<sup>i</sup> For example, the BBC closed down a range of sports and music-related discussion boards following the Graf Report into the corporation's online activities in 2004 (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/3866355.stm>, accessed August 29, 2013). This move reflected a broader view of such discussion boards as difficult to moderate and relatively peripheral to the public service mission of the corporation.