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Professional vs. participatory ideals

Peter Dahlgren

Web-based civic participation in democracies, especially in the sprawling domain of alternative politics, continues to grow. In this paper I explore the intersection of two trajectories of such participation: one that takes the form of journalism (broadly understood) and the other that is transnational in character. Participatory journalism unavoidably evokes normative issues that professional journalism has always grappled with. Global activism, in turn, can be analytically framed by the theme of civic cosmopolitanism. My aim is to highlight and juxtapose these two sets of ideals, two normative frameworks for guiding practice in regard to journalism. In the first section I survey the Web environment from the standpoint of its enhanced capacity to enable citizens to engage with their societies and the world. Journalistic activity has become a part of this kind of online engagement, and thus normative issues about these practices quickly arise. In the second section, I sketch some of the relevant contours of cosmopolitanism, underscoring the normative themes that it raises. The final section comprises an interface with horizons of civic cosmopolitanism and those of a dilemma-ridden professional journalism; I try to pull the strands together by elucidating the implications that ensue.

KEYWORDS civic cosmopolitanism; democratic participation; global activism; online journalism; participatory journalism

Introduction

The world changes, and with it our understanding of it—even if the goodness of fit between the world in some “objective” sense and our grasp of it will always remain problematic. One important factor in shaping the way we see the world beyond our own face-to-face experience is of course journalism, with its various institutions, practices, and representations. Journalism finds itself in a period of dramatic transition; indeed, the term “crisis” has been a part of the discussions for some years now, applied to a complex field that is witnessing pushes and pulls from several directions, deriving from changes in, among other things, financial circumstances, technologies, media landscapes, audience use patterns, and notions of professionalism. (There is, of course, a vast literature on these themes; for recent contributions in the American context, see McChesney and Nichols [2011]; and the current annual “State of the News Media” report [Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism 2011].) A specific development to be noted in this regard is that, increasingly, journalism is not being done only by journalists. This is *per se* not historically new, but the magnitude and diversity of the actors and practices involved today are significant.

There have been and are many modes of citizen participation in civil society and public spheres, and certainly the range of such involvement has been growing with the

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spread of digital media. That journalism is rapidly becoming a robust field for civic agency is laudable from a general democratic perspective. Still, as we shall see, questions have to be raised regarding the significance of such civic participation in the ever-evolving state of journalism, given the centrality of this institution for the life of democracy. If the criteria for professional journalism are being decentred, how should we view the alternatives on offer from the still inchoate vision of participatory journalism? Participatory journalism today takes a variety of forms, while mainstream journalism opens itself up to assistance and collaboration from citizens. These developments are far from controversial, and serve not least to further destabilise traditional definitions of the field and its profession. The reactions from within established journalistic institutions have certainly been mixed.

In regard to Web-based civic engagement, there is another important development, one that we can situate in the wake of globalisation: the increasingly transnational character of many people's frames of perception. The "world" is becoming, especially via mediated representations, more "global". Our mental maps are not only filling in more details in areas that previously were fuzzy or even simply non-existent, but we can also observe an increased understanding and even engagement in areas and issues that lie beyond national borders. Civic engagement is increasingly going global. Certainly we must be sociologically alert here, since such evolution of perceptual and normative frames of reference is not evenly distributed among national populations. Yet, from the standpoint of civic participation, the global dimension takes on increasing relevance. The contemporary term usually associated with such developments is, despite its lack of full semantic security, cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism as it is understood today, however, is more than a description of expanding cognitive horizons. It also incorporates normative and analytic dimension in regard to one's encounters with and action towards others. It thus has relevance for citizens' agency in global settings, leading us to the notion of what we can call civic cosmopolitanism.

In this paper I explore the intersection of participatory journalism with the traditional horizons of the profession, framed by the theme of civic cosmopolitanism. While I indicate the social contingencies of the phenomena, my main concern is to highlight and juxtapose these two sets of ideals, two normative frameworks for guiding practice in regard to journalism. To set the scene, in the first section of the article I survey the Web environment from the standpoint of its enhanced capacity to enable citizens to engage with their societies and the world. Journalistic activity has become a part of this kind of online engagement, and we can quickly see how issues arise about these practices. Thereafter, in the second section, I sketch some of the relevant contours of cosmopolitanism, underscoring the normative themes that it raises. The final section comprises an interface with horizons of civic cosmopolitanism and those of a dilemma-ridden professional journalism; I try to pull the strands together by elucidating the implications and the issues that ensue.

The Web Environment: Empowering, Ambivalent

Media Metamorphosis and Civic Participation

The dramatic transformation of the media landscape, inexorably connected to an array of social, economic, political and cultural factors, confronts us as a decisive yet still on-going development of the historical present. In fact, since the advent of the internet on

a mass scale in the mid-1990s, the newer electronic media and their affordances, as well as the creative practices that emerge in tandem with them, are in constant transformation. In more recent years, the internet and its ancillary technologies, such as mobile phones and the platforms for social media, have further extended this development. Who would have thought from the beginning that Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube would become important institutions of the public sphere? Even the concept of Web 2.0, which seemed like such a clear and convenient marker of a technological transition a few years ago—signalling the increasing participatory character of the new media platforms—has today become an overburdened signifier. We continually load it with new implications, and it will probably soon need a replacement. Further, the converging relationship between the traditional mass media and the new interactive media is an attribute of strategic importance in the new Web environment. Indeed, through convergence, the distinction between the two media domains itself becomes increasingly difficult to maintain.

An important attribute of the internet (broadly understood) is its capacity to facilitate horizontal or civic communication: people and organizations can link up with each other for purposes of sharing information and experience, providing mutual support, organizing, mobilizing, or solidifying collective identities. Mediated citizenship can be said to have emerged with the spread of print and literacy; film, especially the newsreel, made its contribution; radio and television added their respective components of broadcasting. And now the digital media contribute their particular features to this evolution, impacting on how people participate socially and culturally, and not least on how civic agency is enacted and how politics gets done. Indeed, the realm of politics is transmuting; many citizens, alongside of—or instead of—traditional politics are also exploring “life-”, “identity-”, and “cultural” politics; some are also engaging in global issues that cross national boundaries (I explore these themes in more detail in Dahlgren 2009).

The concept of participation, as used in media studies and political science, for example, has been a somewhat elastic signifier, with meanings ranging from lighter versions such as “to be attentive to” and “to be present at” to heavier ones like “sharing decision-making” and “acting under equal premises” (see Carpentier 2011). In my view, if one uses the term—as I do here—in relation to democratic theory, participation inevitably leans towards meaning that implies power relations. Democratic participation, in all its various forms, both formal and informal, must in some way have implications and consequences, if democracy is to have any substance. The Web environment provides extensive potential for civic participation; there is a wide array of participatory practices available, and new ones constantly being generated. The tools are more and more effective, less expensive, and easier to use; access and collaboration are increasing, and we are evolving from being mostly media consumers to becoming many media producers—or “producers”, as the current jargon calls this synthesis of traditionally distinct roles. From the standpoint of civic participation, these are indeed impressive and historically unprecedented possibilities—even if the actual civic usage remains very far from the potential.

At the same time, the obstacles come quickly into focus. The density of the Web environment in the contemporary media landscape means that there is an enormous competition for attention, not least in regard to political affairs, that all Web-based actors face. More fundamentally, civic internet activity takes place against the backdrop of democracy’s difficulties, power structures, economic crises, and late modern socio-cultural dislocation. Not least civic engagement is continually overshadowed by other forms of activity on the Web, such as consumption, entertainment, and general social interaction.

We must avoid reductionist thinking that seeks technological fixes for societal ills; the Web will not in itself “save” democracy. Policy discourses and journalistic commentary at times lead us astray in this regard, for example when the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt become simplistically framed as “Twitter revolutions”. Yet the fact remains that the digital media have altered the way politics gets done and offer possibilities that can enormously expand civic agency.

Lingering Ambivalence

The force-field of optimism and pessimism is very visible in discussions and research about the role of the digital media in democracy. While many proponents enthuse about how this new world of information is having an immensely positive impact on everything from personal development to the character of our civilization, authors like Morozov (2011) argue that the idea has been seriously oversold, and that internet technology is not only failing to democratise the world, but is used by authoritarian regimes to control its citizens and suppress dissent. From a cognitive angle, Carr (2010) argues that the digital media are undermining our capacity to think, read and remember. If many observers side with Sunstein (2008) in regard to how the participatory “wisdom of the many” (as manifested, for example in Wikipedia and the blogosphere) is producing new and better forms of knowledge, other such as Keen (2008) warn of the dangers of participatory Web 2.0, arguing that it erodes our values, standards, and creativity, as well as erodes cultural institutions.

Clearly we are in no position at this historical juncture to make any final commitment to pure optimism or pessimism in regard to the digital media and democracy. However, reading the various points of view reminds us of the complexities involved. And should we choose to be led by a guarded optimism, we are at least aware of some of the major issues and pitfalls involved. If it seems rash to proclaim that “the internet will save democracy by enhancing participation”, we can at least note that the on-going media metamorphosis is having a profound impact on the conditions of participation and the dynamics of democracy.

The Journalistic Turn

The use of the Web for civic and political participation emerged at the dawn of the internet era and continues to grow (see, e.g., Atton 2005; Lievrouw 2011). That civic online engagement should turn to journalistic forms comes as no surprise. Historically, of course, there have been innumerable versions of an alternative press or radical media, often connected to particular social or political movements (see, e.g., Atton 2002; Downing 2000; Ostertag 2007; Waltz 2005). On the Web, we see the continuation of these traditions, as well as the emergence of new ones, facilitated by the unprecedented technical affordances. Various forms of citizen-assisted journalism are encouraged by mainstream journalistic institutions, especially when their own journalists do not have direct access to unfolding events; the reporting from the recent events of the insurrections in the Arab world are but one case in point. Participatory journalism has grown markedly in the past few years, as the news industry undergoes serious transformation, not least in regard to its use of social media. With non-journalists using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and

blogs to generate and share journalistic material, journalism is gradually becoming more interactive, collaborative, diverse, partisan, and immediate. This has unquestionably deepened and broadened the public spheres of democratic societies—and helped challenge the power structure in authoritarian ones.

The situation of online journalism today is difficult to grasp in its totality. This sprawling domain is comprised of mainstream online media, alternative journalism sites, the blogosphere, social media, individual and group productions, including efforts by social movements and other activists and groups of every imaginable persuasion—political, religious, and lifestyle advocates, hobbyists, and much more. All manner of “amateur”-, as well as “para-” or “quasi-journalism” are juxtaposing and blending with each other. Facts and opinions, debates, gossip, nonsense, misinformation, the insightful, the deceptive, the poetic, are all mixed together, scrambling the traditional boundaries between journalism and non-journalism.

There is a justifiably celebratory tone in much of the discussions about how the Web facilitates the participatory character of journalism. However, we should try to keep a sober sociological eye on these developments. For one thing, it is perhaps easy to lose sight of just how prominent mainstream reporting still remains, not least in foreign coverage. Also, much citizen-generated journalism operates symbiotically with mainstream material, even if commenting or contesting it. Moreover, concerning citizen-assisted journalism, there is a strong tendency for the professionals to maintain a tight gate-keeping function and editorial grip on the submitted material, and we see little of new angles or formats emerging in this context (Thurman and Hermida 2010). Looking at journalism in the blogosphere, Campbell et al. (2010) found that non-professional journalistic bloggers only very rarely generate original news; this happens mostly when the blogger has some kind of specialized knowledge or an unusual access to unfolding events. The authors also underscore the vast amount of information available on the Web can in itself serve to destabilize traditional journalism, in that it permits audiences to filter content according to their own values. On the other hand, bloggers do have the capacity to impact on the news agenda by reactivating or reframing news stories.

Despite the contingencies that limit the practices and impact of participatory journalism, such civic initiatives are altering the character of journalism and should be seen as a democratic asset. Yet these developments also give rise to many questions, of course (see, e.g., the collections by Papacharissi [2009], Rosenberry and St. John 2010], and Tunney and Monaghan [2010]), not least among the defenders of traditional journalism. The issue of journalism’s definitional boundaries becomes all the more acute as mainstream journalism concurrently grapples with its professional identity in the wake of infotainment’s hybrid formats and the marked increase in forms of opinion journalism. When the boundaries of journalism become unclear, the norms of its practices and the criteria for its evaluation in turn become slippery. For participatory journalism, often fuelled more by the ideals of citizen-driven democracy than by traditional professional values, the encounter with the cosmopolitan horizon provides both inspiration and uncertainty.

Cosmopolitan Connections

In the fifth century BC, the Greek historian Herodotos wrote of his experiences in the multicultural world of his time. Interestingly enough, the award-winning Polish journalist

Ryszard Kapuscinski, who passed away a few years ago, found great inspiration from Herotodos on how to encounter strangers in foreign lands. On his very first foreign assignment he was sent off to India—without a working knowledge of English. His editor gave him a Polish copy of Herotodos' book, a text he carried with him his entire professional life. Kapuscinski's last major publication has relevance here. In his *Travels with Herotodos* (Kapuscinski 2008), he recounts how this Greek, writing two and a half millennia ago, inspired him through the decades to encounter the other in an open, respectful and self-reflexive manner, to try to get a handle on the language being used, to understand the world through the other's frames of perception, and thereby to better understand the contours and limits of his own horizons. A splendid connection across time between two paradigmatic—and pragmatic—cosmopolitans.

Kapuscinski captures some key themes of contemporary cosmopolitanism: the normative element involved in dealing with geographically and/or culturally distant others, the capacity for self-reflection and empathy, and the evolution of one's own frames of reference. Cosmopolitanism offers an analytic angle for approaching issues about social perceptions of and relations with others in the world today. With the continuing integration of the world via the various "scapes" and "flows" of globalization—albeit often in very uneven, unequal, and contested ways—the other, or rather the many others, come all the closer to us. Globalization can thus be seen as the condition that raises cosmopolitanism to its renewed level of relevance. In this sense cosmopolitanism, as a moral perspective for looking at social behaviour towards others, takes on increasing relevance as global others increasingly become a part of our everyday worlds.

Probing a Multivalent Concept

Not surprisingly, if we look at the contemporary literature on cosmopolitanism as a whole, we are struck by a certain definitional fluidity. Skrbis, Kendall, and Woodward (2004), in their extensive review, insist that the notion is poorly specified and in danger of becoming all things to all people. My aim here is not to arrive at a final conceptualization, but rather to simply pull out from this literature that which is of relevance for our discussion about participatory journalism and the expansion of people's horizons of the world. The literature offers a few main trajectories in this regard.

To begin with, much of the discussion about cosmopolitanism ranges over moral theory and political philosophy (Breckenridge et al. 2002; Brock and Brighouse 2005; Nussbaum 2006), addressing the vision of a better, more democratic global political order (e.g. Archibugi 2008; Held 1995, 2010; Gould 2004) or ethical order (e.g. Sullivan and Kymlicka 2007; Vernon 2010), the notion of citizenship, and the issues of rights and inclusion in the contemporary global situation, not least in regard to the European Union (e.g. Benhabib 2004, 2006; Habermas 2006; Morris 2010). These contributions are to a great extent characterized by normative discourse linking cosmopolitanism to democratic worldviews. Few explicitly frame cosmopolitanism in terms of a critical theory that engages with power relations to improve society. Cheah (2007), Dallmayr (2003), Delanty (2009) and Harvey (2009) are notable exceptions who see cosmopolitanism as a potential challenge to neoliberalism. In sum, this strand of the literature, often invoking the philosophy of Levinas, usually frames cosmopolitanism as a moral horizon that involves

responsibility to others in global contexts, while connecting these horizons to a democratic order and the good society.

Cosmopolitanism is also about practices, and has thus to do with individual agency. While this line of thought generally avoids unrealistic admonishments about finding or creating a “new cosmopolitan subject”, it is nonetheless clear that many writers envision a particular set of culturally supported attributes that promote cosmopolitan agency. Smith (2007) makes use of Arendt’s notions of “world” and “worldliness”: these involve a capacity for self-reflection, enhanced care, and certain skills for relating to others. Self-reflexion and irony (Turner 2002) with respect to our own cultural context, origins, and values go hand in hand with a scepticism towards the “grand narratives” of modern ideologies. In other words, tolerance of others must start from a position of scepticism about the ultimate authority of one’s own culture. This does not imply that one does not or should not have a country or a homeland to identify with, but rather that one has a certain reflexive distance to it, that one can see it as but one of many possible homelands on the planet.

Such attributes are not completely unrelated to cultural capital. Achieving such self-reflection and a sense of distance from one’s own background and identity is usually not an inbred human trait. It is usually predicated on routine encounters with those significantly different from oneself. Such contacts and experiences are precisely what many less privileged and insular communities may lack. Indeed, many minority communities may justifiably feel threatened by majoritarian social patterns. The attributes of cosmopolitan agency, then, tend to connect at least in part to questions of social privilege, even if the relationship is complex; e.g. migrant workers and diasporic groups develop versions of cosmopolitan attributes deriving from their own circumstances.

Another set of contributions underscores precisely the socio-cultural preconditions for cosmopolitanism and its subjective dimensions (e.g. Beck 2006; Appiah 2007; Hannerz 1996; Kendall, Woodward, and Skrbis 2009). They also warn against a blanket, universalistic morality to be applied in every context. Dallmayr (2003) refers explicitly to the “situated differences and motivational resources” in discussing our moral responsibilities to the world. Suitable agency in a cosmopolitan perspective is always contingent on circumstances and cannot be predefined; agency is always contextual. While the world order has fortunately agreed on the notion of human rights as a form of universalism, authors like Dallmayr remind us that the actual application of such tenets in concrete situations always involves choice-making. And beyond these overarching principles, our more detailed normative compass must be established anew in each concrete situation.

The socio-cultural angle also suggests that today one does not by definition have to be mobile to be cosmopolitan. While Kant was a famous promoter of cosmopolitanism and seldom ventured far beyond Königsberg, today the local more and more manifests elements of the global in a variety of ways. Not least, we have access to the “world”, via the media, as I shall turn to presently. Sociological common sense suggests that having contact with those different from oneself could help facilitate a cosmopolitan stance. Certainly the world—present and past—is full of examples of successful neighbourhoods, cities, states, and empires where tolerance and openness to difference has prevailed, where cosmopolitanism starts on one’s own street. However, there is no guarantee, and we know that all too often encounters with the other can lead to closure, exclusion, and even violence, if the circumstances are not favourable. Cosmopolitanism is an admirable vision, but can never be taken for granted.

For our purposes here, cosmopolitanism offers a horizon on normative agency in the global arena. In accentuating the situatedness of agency, we can avoid pre-defined universalist norms. At the same time, there is a normative horizon, largely entwined with the values of democracy. Comprising an ensemble of relevant attributes, cosmopolitanism as a mindset still requires socio-cultural circumstances to nurture it. Thus, there is a strand within cosmopolitanism that links agency with democracy, and as citizens engage all the more in transnational issues in the global arena, the concept of civic cosmopolitanism takes on relevance. This form of participatory citizenship very often is manifested online, and increasingly engages in versions of journalism.

The Mediapolis and Civic Cosmopolitanism

Oddly enough, the media have not figured extensively in the literature on cosmopolitanism. A step in making conceptual connections is found in Corpus Ong (2009; see also Hier 2008). One major empirical effort to establish causal links between media use and cosmopolitan mindsets is found in Norris and Ingelhart (2009). Generally, they find that exposure to global media will promote cosmopolitanism. However, the authors underscore the research complexity of establishing causal relationships, and make the point that there are also many non-media variables at work. From another angle and with a focus on television news, Robertson (2010) looks at journalists/editors, news narratives, and viewers around the world to elucidate the complexities around identity and cosmopolitan horizons in the popular imagination. The more specific theme of recognizing and identifying with distant others via news coverage of suffering is found in an extended theoretical essay by Boltanski (1999), while Chouliaraki (2006) addresses this theme in a more empirical manner. This literature demonstrates the media's importance for cosmopolitanism, while at the same time showing that the relationship has many dimensions.

An overarching, essayistic approach to the media's relevance for cosmopolitanism is found in Roger Silverstone's (2006) last major work, which strongly reflects the normative character of cosmopolitanism. Its point of departure is that the media play a decisive role in the constitution of late modernity and its forms of globalization, and they thus lead us inexorably to reflect on cosmopolitanism, journalism, and democracy. For my purposes here, I want to highlight his basic ideas with an eye towards cosmopolitanism as a necessary element for civic agency in the modern globalized world, and the character of the media as a precondition for such agency.

In brief, Silverstone observes that the media are becoming what he calls "environmental"; they no longer can be seen as simply discrete flows of messages or information, but rather take on the character of dense symbolic ecologies that penetrate just about every corner of our existence. What he terms the mediapolis is comprised of the vast communicative space of mediated global appearances. It is via the media that the world appears to us, and where appearance constitutes the world. It is through the media that we learn who we are—and who we are different from—and where relations between self and other are conducted in a global public arena. The media establish connections, relationships; they position us in the world.

The mediapolis is both a normative and an empirical term. Empirically, it is something other than a rational Habermasian public sphere; it is cacophonous, with multiple voices, inflections, images, and rhetoric—it resides beyond logic and rationality, and it

cannot offer any expectation of fully effective communication. The communications dynamic that Silverstone sees here he calls *contrapunctual*: each communicative thread gains significance at best only in relationship to others—together, the ensemble of tension-ridden, contradictory communicative interventions comprise the tumultuous whole.

Normatively, however, despite differences in communicative and other forms of power, the mediapolis demands mutual responsibility between producers and audiences/users, as well as a capacity for reflexivity on the part of all involved, including recognition of cultural differences. This moral response is expressed in our responsibility for thinking, speaking, listening, and acting. It, of course, raises issues of the kinds of reality created by the mediapolis, the kinds of publicness, who appears—and how—as well as who does not appear. There is clearly an element of media power here: definitional control lies most immediately with the media organizations, but Silverstone emphasizes that there is still responsibility on all sides. Journalists, editors, and producers have a responsibility for the representations they offer, while audiences/users have an obligation to reflect on what they encounter and to respond in an ethical manner—both to the world portrayed and towards the media.

The notion of mediapolis is thus a challenge to the inequities of representation, mechanisms of exclusion, the imbalances of media power (via both state and capital), and “the ideological and prejudicial frames of unreflexive reporting and storytelling” (Silverstone 2006, 37). The media, in their representations of the world, inevitably engage in what he calls boundary work: boundaries are constantly being drawn, reinforced, and altered between various constellations of “us and them”. In underscoring the significance of morality and ethics, Silverstone means that moral dimensions should become a focus of analytic concern, just as social, political, and cultural perspectives are part of our analytic approach to the processes of communication.

From Morality to Agency

In all this Silverstone admits that we have some obvious questions to deal with, not least that conceptually the public as such does not have a strong meaningful status, and, we might add, empirically it is not politically very efficacious. Thought, speech, and action are disconnected and compromised by lack of contexts that afford practice, the erosion of memory, the weakness of analytic rigour, and increasingly, by the absence of trust. Also, we witness patterns of withdrawal from the public realm, into the private; in fact, the decline in engagement has been a major dilemma confronting democracy. Silverstone’s reflections on the political go well beyond traditional liberalism as understood in political philosophy, which underscores individuals’ rights and their pursuit of private happiness. His is a political sensibility that puts him at home with republicanism, with its emphasis of individual development through democratic engagement and responsibilities towards collectivities.

Thus, the mediapolis becomes a site for not only moral response, but, potentially, for practices, for civic participation. His notion that our responsibility is expressed in thinking, speaking, listening, and acting puts us directly in touch with the themes of civic agency and skills. The cosmopolitan moral agent must move beyond the state of merely thinking about his or her responsibility; s/he must enact and embody agency via some kind of action (which, in the context of the political, will often take some form of communication). Such a proactive social ethics, that demands engagement with and responsibility for

global others, points us towards cosmopolitan citizenship, a concept which is strongly tied to versions of democracy. This link between cosmopolitanism and democratic civic agency—civic cosmopolitanism—involves translating the cosmopolitan moral stance into concrete political contexts that benefit not just our own interests but those of globalized others in a democratic manner.

Silverstone's book, with its promotion of cosmopolitanism and its normative anchoring, invites us, in a compelling manner, to better conceptualize the links between agency and global responsibility in and via the media. He points out that the mediapolis contains institutions and organizations, which in turn are comprised of categories of people working in their identifiable roles under specific situations: journalists, editors of various sorts, owners, producers, programme directors, managers, accountants, lawyers, audiences, citizens, etc. In short, we have sets of individuals who act as elements of larger institutionalized agencies. I emphasize the individual level not to signal a suspension of a sociological perspective, but to underscore the dimension of human agency, where moral reflection is in principle always possible. The differing horizons of these various social positions provide different contexts in terms of moral action.

In conceptualizing the transition from moral response to civic agency via the mediapolis, it is worth reiterating here Dallmayr's (2003) caution in regard to moral universalism. He argues cogently that an excessive emphasis on moral universalism can lead us to ignore the contextual differences, the external constraints, that shape the specificity of human action. Moreover, he stresses the importance of actively promoting agency; cosmopolitanism thus becomes a part of a global, critical democratic project. He insists that, "it is insufficiently moral—in fact, it is hardly moral at all—to celebrate universal values everywhere without also seeking to enable and empower people in their different settings and locations" (Dallmayr 2003, 438). He thus advocates a turn to practice and participation, i.e. to politics, broadly understood to include all forms of civic engagement—including journalism, I would add.

If we should be wary of moral universalisms, practice still needs norms and criteria to guide it. This gives rise to questions of which norms, and whose criteria? On what authority? These issues become quite concrete as we shift our focus to the terrain where civic cosmopolitanism encounters the practices and representations of journalism. A large range of non-professional actors—individuals and organizations—are doing forms of journalism that are a part of the global mediapolis. Some see themselves as doing journalism, albeit of an alternative kind (e.g. Indymedia), others define themselves as established civil society actors (e.g. the flora of international non-governmental organizations), some are explicitly activist or at least advocacy oriented (e.g. institutionalized groups or social movements promoting human rights, environmental improvement, gender issues, whether or not under the broad umbrella of alterglobalization), while others may be very much part-timers or even engage in one-off interventions via social media. In all this kind of journalistic activity, the civic impetus, with cosmopolitan dimensions, confronts, implicitly or explicitly, journalistic traditions.

Journalism and Plural Realities

To pull together the main threads of the discussion thus far: the Web enables new forms of civic participation, and even if there are many contingencies that set limits on the

character and extent of such participation, this marks a new historical phase in the history of democracy. Internet-based democratic participation is also going global, and the horizon of cosmopolitanism invokes a normative dimension, underscoring a sense of responsibility towards distant others. As citizens, especially via digital media, are increasingly operating in transnational and/or trans-cultural contexts, we conceptualize the notion of civic cosmopolitanism, understood as the attributes associated with democratic participation in global contexts. Such agency is always contingent—there is no detailed normative handbook as to how to proceed, even if general moral precepts about universal rights are always relevant. At the same time, it is clear that the attributes of cosmopolitanism, such as empathy and self-reflection, have varying socio-cultural origins and cannot be merely assumed. Nurturing these attributes can be seen as an on-going project, one with no guarantees and no real endpoint, only a sense of importance and indeed urgency. Elements of this global participation venture into, mingle with, and challenge the field of journalism, while the institutions and practices of journalism already find themselves in a turbulent situation from pressures from a number of other directions as well. The question of which norms should guide journalism thus hovers prominently in our field of vision.

Truth—and Moral Responsibility

Non-professional civic agents engaging in journalism in its many forms often refer explicitly to the ideals of democratic participation, perceiving themselves as embodying these ideals in their journalistic practice. At the same time, it is not possible to simply ignore the norms of journalism, even if they today are less fixed and more problematic than before. These norms remain ultimately tied to our understanding of democracy. And if that concept has also become more multivalent and contested, we need to continue to grapple with both of them, in relation to each other. We can refract the interface of the ideals of journalism and participation through two dimensions: the epistemic issue of truth and the moral dimension of witnessing.

A cornerstone of traditional journalism has always been its commitment to truth. Yet one need not be a professional philosopher to understand that the notion of “truth” is fraught with difficulties. On a basic level, the description and characterization of factual reality, of events and developments, is in principle not problematic, assuming the information is available. The number of civilians killed or wounded by a bomb, the location of the rebel headquarters, the extent of the proposed cuts in social services, are the kinds of facts that can be verified. Yet, even with so-called “solid facts”, there can always be different ways of slanting them, giving them different significance by using different news frames, narrative structures, value premises, vocabularies, and so forth. As we move into the more complex domains of human activity and its meaning, reporting becomes open for still more contestation. Yet mainstream journalism tends to cluster its interpretive horizons fairly tightly. As socially situated storytellers, news organizations usually deploy well-embedded, taken-for-granted discourses that pre-structure much of the dominant meanings to be conveyed as, for example, Robert Fiske (2006) demonstrates in his coverage of the Middle East and in his critical reflection on Western reporting of it.

Language use is thus always already implicated in social horizons, pre-understandings, and power relations; ideologically charged discourses can shape the

meaning of reported events, intentionally or not. As Kant pointed out, the conditions of our knowing are always complex and our knowledge of the world (and of ourselves) is always mediated and filtered in various ways. Despite its established professional routines, journalism is always confronted by the epistemic challenge of grasping and transmitting knowledge in an ever-changing world; the problem of knowing is never secure. To deal with this, particularly in a time when relativism is gaining some legitimate ground, practitioners of journalism need helpful tools for orientation.

One conceptual starting point lies in acknowledging that the truth may in fact be multi-dimensional. And even if not all versions have equal validity in our own eyes, others may see it differently, depending on how they are situated in the world. Thus, for journalism's professional tradition, while the commitment to the truth remains crucial, this stance will not alleviate it from having to deal with the plural nature of social reality. If the quest for the truth remains paramount, it must increasingly pursue this by taking into account the pluralization of valid frames of perception in the world today. Further, if the distinction between fact and value seems less self-evident today, the solution lies not in abandoning the idea of the distinction, but rather in finding more useful ways to conceptualize it. This is particularly important as the opinion side of journalism expands, even within mainstream journalism. Reporters need to be alert to how various frames of reference may distinguish between facts and values in concrete cases. For example, in the history of a given conflict, the different parties will most likely have internalized different histories of the hostilities, which shape their perceptions of the present.

The civic participatory thrust in journalistic activity tends to highlight interpretation and advocacy; this is democratically healthy, yet must be counterbalanced by a traditional trajectory that, while sensitive to multiple realities and modes of perceptions, emphasize the quest for truth. Tensions within the traditional journalistic ideals and norms are inevitable, but hopefully they will serve rather than hamper the goal of truthfulness in the context of an ever-pluralizing world.

Yet journalism cannot rest content with tackling the epistemic challenge of transmitting truthful renderings of reality. From the horizons of the mediapolis, we understand that it also has moral responsibilities to others. This can be formulated in a variety of ways, but in particular it is the function of witnessing that should be underscored. As Chouliaraki (2010) discusses, the testimonial service that journalism can provide makes use of factual information but addresses us in ways that invite affective response and reflection on possible practices. Ideally, witnessing puts us face to face with the situation of distant others, and not just as individualized spectators, but as part of constructed collectivities, of publics, who embody the potential for civic agency. Understood in this manner, journalistic witnessing—of both the participatory kind and the professional tradition—can be seen as a form of civic communication whose normative grounding is, fundamentally, the moral horizons of democracy. Journalism does not just inform, but at some level resonates with us emotionally and prefigures democratic agency.

In the contemporary cacophonous mediapolis of online global communication between individuals, groups, institutions, publics, and political cultures, as well as within national societies divided by political horizons, ethnicity, and culture, there are many voices telling many stories, and in principle there are many possible stories to tell about the same phenomenon. For journalistic activity, a cosmopolitan disposition is indispensable for dealing with such heterogeneity. This does not mean uncritically accepting

everything at face value—but nor does it permit one to simply dismiss that which hovers beyond one’s own immediate mental maps.

News narratives are not just vehicles for content, they have an epistemic dimension as well; narratives comprise ways of knowing and relating to the world, offering different horizons and experiences. A regime victim-turned-rebel fighting an authoritarian state will most likely, in a journalistic context, tell a different story than a foreign professional journalist who has just arrived in the country, especially if s/he makes use of local narrative traditions. One account is not necessarily more or less true than the other, but each can offer a specific version of reality. Also, the rebel in this case will most likely be a better source for journalistic witnessing; giving journalistic voice to his testimony puts us in the communicative domain of his realities, touches us at the affective level, and invites a moral response from us.

Journalism in a Multi-epistemic World

Mainstream professionals as well as civic cosmopolitans need to come to terms with traditional journalistic criteria to see what can and should be salvaged, and what new elements need to be introduced. If the notion of objectivity is not so helpful these days, there are other traditional attributes or criteria that can at least help aim journalism closer to the truth, even if their application is not always easy. These are: accuracy, which reminds us that the adherence to the facts as best understood remains indisputable; fairness, which encourages representing a pluralism of points of view and voices; transparency, which requires self-revelation as well as self-reflection, making visible the journalistic production process; and accountability, which involves checks and consequences for deliberate malpractice, such as lies and disinformation. For both professional journalism and participatory civic cosmopolitans, these criteria can continue to serve as useful guideposts, albeit in somewhat differing ways for each camp.

To this list we should also add cosmopolitan reflection, i.e. the mental exercise of understanding how one’s view of reality is shaped by a range of specific factors and is thus always situated and limited. Such reflection also includes the insight that there are indeed other, alternative ways of looking at the world. This is admittedly a tall order, given not least that within journalism there is much reality pre-definition built into the narrative discourses used. One could say that a common attribute of mainstream professional journalism is that it often tends to represent the world via a seemingly unified voice. This is of course practical, and rhetorically, gives credence to its authority. However, it also fosters the norm of a singular version of the truth. It thus needs to deepen its sensitivity to what we can call the multi-epistemic nature of the modern world.

To analytically distance oneself from cemented taken-for-grantedness about unitary truth is not simple, but not impossible. It is perhaps easier for some activist civic cosmopolitans, since they often have a background in critically confronting dominant media discourses. Yet even professional journalism is capable of it, and we see examples emerging. From the days of having local “stringers” assist global news bureaus to the current situation where news organizations actively recruit material from anybody on the scene and make use of social media (albeit filtering and structuring this material according to their established practices), professional journalism is encountering more quasi- and non-professional voices who are telling viable journalistic stories. Journalism is becoming more multi-vocal, more collaborative, even if the professional desire to maintain editorial control remains strong.

It could be that what has been now set in motion is precisely a growing pluralism of voices; while not quite a seismic shift yet, a transformation is clearly under way. We see this, for example, in the various locally produced magazine segments that appear on the global news networks. Also, without idealizing it, we could say that Al-Jazeera, for example, has developed a heterogeneous journalistic profile that takes a point of departure in its location in the Middle East, makes use of reporters and bloggers with a number of nationalities, and yet manages to resonate even with Western audiences. This suggests that today there are cosmopolitan options available—and that, significantly, there is a growing market for it. Fox News, of course, demonstrates that there are also markets for anti-cosmopolitanism. The world would probably not have been ready for either organization two decades ago, which suggests something about the turbulent nature of the present historical situation.

The transformation is, of course, also manifested in the broad range of journalistic activity in the social media. How and where we draw the boundaries between journalism and non-journalism will remain a (hopefully fruitful) point of contention in the immediate future, but at present we recognize that blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have become integrated into the public sphere. From these platforms, we are today getting some important journalism that demonstrates both a loyalty to the truth as well as compelling moral witnessing. This is evidenced, to take but one example, in the materials from the ongoing uprising in Syria, where most professional journalists are barred. While civic cosmopolitans mostly make use of the Web 2.0 affordances, some will no doubt in the future be entering mainstream journalism, further contributing to its evolution. In the meantime, as traditional journalism is becoming all the more reliant on citizens' use of social media, the boundaries of journalism are rendered yet more porous.

If journalistically inclined participatory civic cosmopolitans tilt their journalistic endeavours towards advocacy, the challenge becomes to preserve in some fashion the traditional journalistic virtues while at the same time pursuing their civic and political objectives. For professional journalists, the key challenge has to do with dealing constructively with the increasing number of social worlds that diverge from their own, where actors are emerging and making claims to be legitimate voices. We would be wise not to anticipate any swift resolution to the force-field between professional and civic ideals of online journalism; it is a dynamic that will continue to play out intensely in the years ahead, shaped and altered as circumstances evolve. But for the sake of democracy, we need a positive unfolding.

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