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# TELEVISION AND DEMOCRACY

JEFFREY CHOWN

Peter Dahlgren: *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media*. Sage, London 1995.

William Hoynes: *Public Television for Sale: Media, the Market, and the Public Sphere*. Westview, Boulder, CO 1994.

Marc Raboy, ed.: *Public Broadcasting for the 21st Century*. University of Luton Press, Luton 1996.

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On March 3, 1991 Los Angeles police engaged in a high speed auto chase through the streets of urban areas until they were able to apprehend a man named Rodney King. As is often their custom, four white police officers gave the black King a brutal beating with night sticks while he lay on the ground after exiting his car. On this particular night, however, an amateur video photographer was trying out his new camcorder and happened to catch the beating on tape. The subsequent display of the grainy images of police brutality on national television touched off resentment in the urban ghettos of L.A. that eventually erupted in rioting, arson, and violence that resulted in millions of dollars in damage and a number of deaths upon the announcement that the police officers were found innocent of wrongdoing.

The events of what became known as the Rodney King case provide an interesting way of thinking about Habermas's distinction between the public and private sphere, which undergirds much of the theorising about television's role in modern society represented in the three new books listed above. The event started in the private sphere: George Holliday, the photographer, bought a camera mass-marketed for the home consumer to shoot private scenes of family life. Law enforcement

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resides in the public sphere, but when police officers routinely beat suspects after car chases, instead of an official policy, we have a private understanding between the officers and their clientele. Holliday's amateur images of police brutality obliterate the distinction between public and private, effectively thrusting images from the backstage onto the frontstage with chaotic and disturbing consequences. As the eighty seconds of privately photographed video rapidly became a media event, it became clear that there was little official policy that could predict or martial the public response, which could be described as a return of the repressed.

In the court trial, lawyers effectively denatured the video images by freeze-frame and slow-motion techniques that worked to diminish the effect for jurors considering the case. In the court of public opinion, however, there seemed to be no other way to judge the frequently televised images than as raw police brutality with racial overtones. As the riot erupted, following the announcement of acquittal, it became clear that television coverage of the ensuing carnage in effect added fuel to the fire. Angry, disenfranchised members of the L.A. underclass saw images of destruction and anarchy on the television and rushed out into the streets to join the mayhem. As is usually the case with American ghetto uprisings, the victims of the arson and pillaging were the businesses located in the ghettos. CNN featured images of Korean immigrants protecting their ghetto liquor stores with shotguns. The well-protected suburbs where the jury lived were for the most part untouched.

Peter Dahlgren and William Hoynes both idealistically hope that television can enter the public sphere and strengthen the justice promised by democracy and its precepts. Hoynes writes: "In an increasingly complex (and often highly secretive) government bureaucracy, television journalists serving in some sense as representatives of the viewing public can uncover and publicise official misdeeds, providing citizens with the resources they need to act" (27). The Rodney King case suggests that either the public is woefully short on the resources needed for responsible action when injustice is exposed in a democracy, or that television's conduct and role in civil society is in need of dramatic overhaul.

Hoynes' book *Public Television For Sale: Media, the Market, and the Public Sphere*, is, despite its pessimistic title, an impressive argument for ways in which television could become a proactive and responsible force in the public sphere. Hoynes confines his purview to that of non-commercial television broadcasting in the United States, and even as he is authoritative on the limitations on public broadcasting as it is presently practised, he is hopeful about its possibilities. This does not prevent him from warning: "The reinvigoration of the public sphere will not be accomplished simply by reforming our public television system. Public television is, nevertheless, a necessary site in which to take this challenge"(177).

Michael Tracey's survey of American public broadcasting in Raboy's anthology is far less optimistic about the possibility that PBS (Public Broadcasting System) could become a positive force in the American public sphere. He mockingly calls shows such as "Front-line" and "The American Experience" "the great and good, the senior clerics of the established church of American public broadcasting." These are the very programs that Hoynes holds out as showing the promise of what PBS could be. The central dilemma that both Tracey and Hoynes acknowledge is that PBS in America is only watched by a tiny minority of the overall audience, according to rating services 2-3 per cent of the viewing audience. Advocates of PBS argue that this 2-3 per cent is

comprised of influential, educated, and well-placed members of the society who are in a position to do positive things given quality programming and information. Such an argument is, of course, elitist and possibly anti-democratic, but such are the contradictions within which PBS operates.

In the current American political landscape, PBS is under fierce attack by the now dominant Republican party, led by Newt Gingrich, who has been outspoken in his calls for a privatisation of PBS. As Hoynes details, conservative Republicans have threatened PBS going back to the days of Richard Nixon because of its perceived left-liberal bias. A joke, however, going around last fall had two conservative republicans on the House floor talking about PBS. The first senator remarked: "Did you hear that Newt Gingrich is going to kill PBS?" The second conservative senator responded: "Damn, just when we finally got control of it."

The joke trades on the fact that because of corporate sponsorship, often oil companies, there is the widely held perception that PBS has become increasingly timid about voicing any critique of corporate America or about governmental policies. Hoynes holds up "Front-line," a documentary series from WGBH in Boston, as a shining example of PBS taking on the role of the fourth estate. However, "Front-line" may be living on its past reputation. Of late, the only corporation practice it seems to criticise is Japanese. A recent five-hour series entitled "The Gulf War" was triumphalist in tone, with sympathetic soundtrack music accompanying narration about American decision-making and little counter-point to George Bush's version of the events that unfolded in Kuwait and Iraq.

Hoynes book came out in 1994, and he optimistically notes: "The Clinton administration, which is clearly more sympathetic to public television and to nonmarket institutions in general than its predecessors, may be a significant factor. One concrete result of a more sympathetic president will be a change in the makeup of the FCC. A new FCC, less committed to a deregulatory, market-oriented philosophy, could play an important role in facilitating the restructuring of public television" (179). Quite to the contrary, however, the FCC is currently accelerating the deregulation of American television so that a bigger portion of major-market television stations can be owned by huge media corporations. The only effective counterattack to Gingrich's attack on PBS has been an off-handed remark by Hillary Clinton — "I don't care what the speaker (Gingrich) says about me, I just wish he would leave Big Bird alone" — the popular character on "Sesame Street," the show millions of American pre-schoolers watch faithfully. There has been speculation that the Clinton/Gore team has been reluctant to come strongly to the aid of PBS because they feel single channel transmission is a soon to be outmoded technology on the information superhighway.

Hoynes feels the biggest limitation of public broadcasting is "the funding process, the transformation of the public into an audience. The consequences of goal ambiguity suggest that the market, as both a material and an ideological force, is at the centre of an explanation of the limitations of public television" (157). To that end, he proposes solutions that would cut PBS's reliance on corporate donations and fickle legislators. Often these are modelled on European systems: a flat tax on every television sold, or a luxury tax on all commercial television advertising, which would be deposited in a trust fund for PBS. The problem, of course, is that convincing Americans to accept any kind of new tax is an impossible proposition, even with Hoynes's clearly articulated and strongly argued plan for what the tax would accomplish. As Hoynes is quick to

point out, American PBS has not convinced the public that it is worth transforming when the vision of what it might become is so unimagined.

Tracy, in the Raboy volume, puts a slightly different spin on the failure of American public broadcasting. He faults the original creation of the service in 1967 for its overemphasis on local communities, which could not meet production costs to compete with commercial network television. The original idea was the PBS would be an active agent in fostering regional identity. However, as Tracy argues, America is a transient society where individuals move often and feel little sense of loyalty to their region. As it has evolved, PBS relies on programming predominantly from about eight major stations. None of the eight can really match the sort of funding and production values of the BBC, so it is no surprise that American PBS is one of the few places where British television has become a staple of the programming schedule.

The rest of the Raboy volume *Public Broadcasting for the Twenty-First Century* is a survey of public service broadcasting in a variety of settings. Part One is titled "Shifting Paradigms in the Heartlands of Public Broadcasting" and includes Paddy Scannell on Britain, Olof Hulten on Sweden, Wolfgang Hoffmann-Riem on Germany, Jean-Claude Burgelman and Peter Perceval on Belgium, Marc Raboy on Canada, Marcus Breen on Australia, Shinichi Shimizu on Japan, and Tracey on the USA. Part Two is titled "Emerging Models for Development and Democracy" and includes Karol Jakubowicz on Poland, Olga Zernetskaya on the Ukraine, Nikhil Sinha on India, Nahum Gorelick on Namibia, Florangel Rosario-Braid on the Philippines, Charles Okigbo on Equatorial Africa, Gareth Price on Cambodia, and Rafael Roncagliolo on Latin America.

Raboy's introduction does not survey the volume's essays but rather the general literature on the subject of national public broadcasting systems. Despite the volume's organisation around national systems, Raboy notes that there is "the problematic nature of national identity itself. Identity today is increasingly multifaceted, and national identity is a particularly contested issue in many countries, even among some of the most politically stable ... If public service broadcasting is to speak to the real concerns of its public, it has to rethink its approach to one of its most cherished objectives: the cementing of national unity." Some of the concerns that follow from this perspective are whether developing countries have the resources to mount public broadcasting systems, or in the developed countries whether public broadcasting has a future in the increasingly internationalised communications industry with its new technologies. He concludes: "The challenge is not to defend any particular institutional territory, as it is often framed. It is rather how to invent something new, remembering that broadcasting service is first of all a public good."

Peter Dahlgren's *Television and the Public Sphere* does not take as its central concern public broadcasting systems. In passing, he notes that Habermas's notion of the public sphere was central to debates about the role of public service broadcasting in Britain. "However, critiques of public service broadcasting were also forthcoming, even from the left. Across Western Europe, these institutions were perceived as paternalistic in their programme output, they tended to ignore the growing pluralistic and multicultural character of their own societies, and they were generally stagnant and in need of creative renewal" (13).

Dahlgren feels that in the 1980s policies were developed that strove to increase channel offerings rather than strengthen the public broadcasting component. When

more programs became available, instead of more diversity there was more homogeneity because of the logic of competition. Dahlgren writes: "The long-term dilemma is that the remaining diversity becomes replaced by mere repetitive abundance, and that abundance will be low on programming which strengthens the public sphere" (14).

For the most part, however, Dahlgren's focus is on a more abstract, theoretical notion of television in the public sphere. His analysis draws heavily on Habermas, semiotics, political economy of media, and post-modernism. Usually, he is writing more about theories of television than about television itself, in contrast to the approach of the Hoynes and Raboy books which are bolstered by descriptions of the phenomenon under consideration. To my mind, Dahlgren's theoretical points would be clearer with more detailed examples of contemporary television practice. For instance, he writes "Popular journalism needs to be 'educational' in the sense of broadening people's horizons, of making new connections between the accessible, experienced world and the world beyond those boundaries" (52). However, in the entire book not one example of such ideal journalism will be cited. As a result, Dahlgren's contention that television journalism is moving towards more entertainment values at the expense of serious content feels a little too smug and unargued. He does provide an interesting list of new generic developments in television journalism, again with little detail, but conclusions such as "eight-second sound bites, cosy chat shows and silly entertainment do not enhance democracy" (57) seem a little obvious.

Dahlgren is more comfortable in the theoretical world, and for instance, his argument that Habermas fails to come to grips with Freud's view of the unconscious is most illuminating. A sample: "At base, Habermas seemingly treats the unconscious as a defective feature of our subjectivity ... Television and other manifestations of our mass-mediated semiotic environment largely side-step communicative rationality and employ other discursive modes, but we would not be in a position to understand how, if our analytic tools were grounded on Habermas' notion of the unconscious" (106-107). Dahlgren argues that much of television's appeal is "arational," which sets my mind thinking about how the term applies to MTV or 30-second advertising, but Dahlgren will supply no such applications.

At the end of his book, Dahlgren calls for a renewed sense of public duty and an "advocacy domain," which would "allow alternative perceptions to flourish, generating adversarial interpretations and cultural practices" (157). He hopes this will lead to more cultural diversity. Perhaps because I see Dahlgren's notions of how we will actually arrive at this "advocacy domain" as fuzzy and unargued, I started this essay with reference to the television-inspired L.A. riots. In America, as the gap between rich and poor becomes more polarised and severe, we feel the lack of a responsible and responsive public sphere more acutely. In the three books considered here, there is much insightful attention to television's shortcomings in regard to the public sphere. However, the trauma of the Rodney King case, the spectacle of the O.J. Simpson trial, the always increasing obsession with televised sports, the banality of political elections, and other very real, pressing societal events suggest that academics and others in positions of influence need to supply another more affirmative vision of what television can do in the public sphere. These three volumes are a start.