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**Public discourse on TV news:
Adult media literacy program for deliberative democracy**

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Adult media literacy program for deliberative democracy**

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Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical review of deliberative democracy and how it can be generated by the public discourse on television news. News journalism has often been suggested as an essential source for democracy because news-media consumption and political talk demonstrate positive influence on the quality of opinion. In order to facilitate and initiate public discourse on political issues, the author proposes media education programs for adults, who have often been neglected in the media education movement.

Our rapidly changing technological world demands that individuals are capable of critical and creative thinking (Feuerstein, 1999). This ability can be practiced and acquired through media literacy skills, the goals of media education. A brief definition of media literacy is “the knowledge, skills, and competencies that are required in order to use and interpret media” (Buckingham, 2003; Tyner, 1998). This knowledge also encompasses the area of context of content, form/style, impact, industry and production (Geiger et al., 2001).

The focus of early media education had often been to protect young people from the negative effects of media, as youth crimes were often attributed to the sexual and violent content of mass media. However, views toward young people’s relationships with the media have changed as young people came to be seen as an autonomous and critical audience (Buckingham, 2003). One of the current goals of media literacy is to help young people have a better understanding of, and active participation in, the media culture surrounding them. In order to prepare young people for a democratic citizenship and democratic and inclusive forms of media production, diverse pedagogies, such as media production, critical media text analysis, discourse on the media, and learning about the media industry, have been proposed. (Buckingham, 2003; Tyner 1998).

While participatory democracy has been emphasized by a number of media educators and scholars, the actual results seem disappointing. For example, during the 1996 presidential election, only 11% of 18-year-olds voted (Kubey, 2004). In fact, in 2000, more votes were cast for “American Idol” than for the U.S. presidential election. The excuse given by many nonvoters was they didn’t see a difference between the presidential candidates (Galician, 2004). Kubey noted that over the past 50 years, a general decline in voter

interest and turnout has been observed, while people's accessibility to important new media has tremendously increased (Kubey, 2004). Thinking that voting ages do not include children and adolescents, this data demonstrates that adults do not have good sense of the participatory democracy, one of the major goals of media literacy. This data shows that adults also need to be equipped with media literacy skills, which they may have missed during their education (Thoman & Jolls, 2004).

However, to date, not many media literacy programs with various goals have been suggested for adults, unlike they were for young people. This paper will review the educational value of a 'public discourse on television news' for adult media education programs and discuss possible impacts on individuals and society if such a program were implemented.

The notion of a public discourse on media is not new; in fact, it has actually been performed by Roundtable, Inc., who named their national dialogue project as "Preview Forum." Preview Forum uses media text from different sources of television programs and documentaries; this text is built around a nationally and locally relevant topic. More than 1500 organizations and institutions and their members have participated to date. The goal of "Preview Forum" is to "use media...to help a community to deliberate on local responses to national issues" and to "bridge that divide (of diverse perspectives) and learn more about the issues and consider community responses" (www.previewforum.com). The general structure for each preview event is as follows: After the greeting and introduction of the program, all participants watch the same segment from the television programs or documentary. Next, small groups with 8 to 12 people discuss the program in relation to the topic given by Roundtable. Then, each

small group presents what they have discussed in front of the entire group. After that, a large group discussion is followed.

“Preview Forum” does not declare itself a media literacy program. However, this program certainly contains many aspects of media literacy. Its discourse on media texts and other social and political issues provoked by the media can provide a chance to better understand the media, culture, and society. This process can also motivate individuals to actively engage in participatory democracy.

However, the value of public discourse on media, which has great potential for an adult media literacy program that can lead to participatory democracy, has not been examined academically, while talks on media at the individual level have been extensively reviewed by several scholars, like Kim, Wyt and Katz (1999). This paper attempts to develop a theoretical framework to show the possible impacts and influences of public discourse on media, especially television news, and evaluate its validity as an adult media literacy program. Although there are many genres of television programs, this literature review will focus only focus on television news, because of its potential to provoke individuals’ political and social engagement. More details will be discussed in the following sections. Since no academic work has been written in this field, the researcher will try to interweave several topics, such as television news, public discourse and deliberative democracy, into one thread, that describes an adult media literacy program.

This paper will be arranged by topics generated by the larger theme of public discourse on television news for media literacy. It will first focus on the importance of the news media and how discussions concerning the news media can be beneficial. Then,

the author will turn to deliberative democracy, which has been discussed by several scholars, such as Jurgen Habermas (1962), Peter Dahlgren (2002), Joohan Kim, Robert O. Wytt, and Elihu Katz (1999). Next, the benefit of public assembly will be examined.

Discourse on television news

News journalism has often been viewed essentially as a guarantee of democracy, because the health of civil society often relies on the information from the news. News journalism is an essential source in raising an informed citizenry. People rely on the information they get from the media when they make decisions. Without news media, any society will eventually face political power abuse, indifference, and alienation (Buckingham, 1993).

However, several studies have suggested that individuals are deficient in their ability to consume the news. Buckingham (2000) suggested that adults learn little from viewing the news. Robinson and Levy (Robinson & Levy, 1986) referred to people's watching of the news as getting a "false sense of knowledge" because television news is based on "a vaguely understood jumble of visual auditory stimuli that leave few traces in long-term memory" (pp. 17-18). Graber (1988) also argued that most television viewers confuse and/or forget what they have watched. People's misunderstanding often distorts their memory performance and watching television programs may give them false illusions by leading individuals to think they actually know what is going on in the world because they have watched it on the news (Gunter, 1991).

However, media create people's interaction (Dewey, 1927) and that interaction, which can be identified as dialogue, can generate positive influences. David Buckingham's book *Children talking television: the making of television literacy* (1993) demonstrated that

dialogue on individuals' experiences and understanding of television programs they watched can lead them to have an in-depth understanding of the texts and to engage aspects of the texts in their lives. After extensive interview and observation of children talking about their television viewing, Buckingham concluded that talking about TV is the "mediation of television meanings" because television messages are blended with other meanings. Therefore, talking about TV serves to generate a new text, constructing a "major interface with the world of action and belief" (Buckingham, 1993). Even though this research targeted children, it can be applied to adults.

Many scholars have considered communicative interaction among citizens essential in democracy theories. Talk is often considered morally and functionally crucial for democracy because talking to each other allows citizens to shape their opinions, which engender the collective will and impact policy (Dahlgren, 2002). In *Strong democracy*, Barber (1984) argued that keeping a sense of collective civic identity and producing a collective will is essential for strong democracy. For him, citizen engagement, which is crucial for democracy, begins with talk. Kim, Wyatt, and Katz's (1999) literature review and empirical research investigating the interrelationships between news-media use, political conversation, opinion formation, and political participation showed that the news media not only trigger political conversation but also positively influence the quality of opinion at both the individual and collective level, and even influence individuals' participatory activities. Their results demonstrated a close-relationship between the number of hours of news-media consumption and frequency of political talk. Additionally, news-media consumption and political talk have a positive influence on the quality of opinion. Finally, their research demonstrated news-media use and political discourse have

a close connection with participatory activities. Therefore, talk can be seen as “constitutive of publics”(Dahlgren, 2002).

Dialogue also provides opportunities to address problems endangering the quality of American civilization, because each individual’s insight is developed into an in-depth perspective during dialogue. As Yankelovich (1999) noted, such in-depth insight is not possible from a single point of view. According to Yankelovich,

Each “it seems to me...” is tempered and enriched in the light of others. All of the “it seems to me...” judgments add up to something more than a random collection of opinions; they reveal an issue viewed from a great variety of perspectives and experiences. (Yankelovich, 1999)

Individuals with raw opinion struggle to incorporate others’ opinions and perspectives as their values and points of view are matched with the issues (Yankelovich, 1999). While television can function as a catalyst for interpersonal communication, television news is especially good at provoking dialogue between people. This is because people talk about news and prime-time television programs more than any other types of program. (Geiger et al., 2001)

While discussing the importance and positive influence of the news media, these articles did not point out the sensationalism and commercialism prevalent in news media.

According to Sparrow (Sparrow, 1999), the quantity and quality of the U.S. news media are very affected by the commercial aspect. He further argued that one of the reasons for most news coverage on politics being “congruence or consistency” (p. 105) is the hierarchy in news organizations. Since the news media are influenced by internal and

external pressures, the limitation of using TV news for public discourse needs to be studied. In addition, none of the scholars discussed the impact of diverse news content, from yellow journalism to the New York Times. Whether any type of news has a positive influence needs to be further investigated.

Deliberative democracy

The public discourse on media can be seen as a deliberative democracy, which is constructed on the idea of democracy and citizens' communicative interaction in civil society and the public sphere. It is the political system that is built on citizens' free discussion of public issues (Barber, 1984; Dahlgren, 2002; Elster, 1998; Kim et al., 1999). Deliberative democracy would be an ideal goal of all democratic societies because it allows all individuals who will be influenced by the decisions made by their representatives voluntarily to participate in decision making (Elster, 1998; Kim et al., 1999). According to Habermas (1987), in public deliberation, citizens come together to manage differences and solve social and political problems; this provides an open-minded exchange of reason. In *Deliberative Democracy*, Jon Elster also defined democracy as "collective decision making with the participation of all who will be affected by the decision or their representative" (p. 8) and deliberation as "decision making by means of arguments offered by and to participants who are committed to the values of rationality and impartiality" (p. 8) Therefore, in deliberative democracy, citizens willingly and freely involve themselves in discussions about public issues. The sharing of information and discussion of politics leads them to form opinions and participate in political processes. This entire process generates discourse and communicative action (Elster, 1998). Therefore, free discussion and voluntary participation, which can generate political

conversation the essence of deliberative democracy, should be encouraged. Conversations engender “enlarged minds,” “representative minds” and “impartial reciprocity” with the “opportunity to think through their idea elements” and decrease of “cognitive inconsistency.” Additionally, the news media are capable of stimulating political conversation (Kim et al., 1999).

The public discourse on media can be seen as a deliberative democracy, which is based on the idea of democracy and citizens’ communicative interaction in civil society/ public sphere. In this regard, Kim, Wyatt and Katz (1999) suggested a model of deliberative democracy through news media use and political conversation.

When discussing the deliberative democracy, Kim et al. (1999), and Dahlgren (2002) emphasized the discursiveness of the conversation by borrowing Habermas’ definition, which viewed the conversation as communicative as communication action for shared understanding, not purposive-strategic action for specific goals. In this discursive democratic system, citizens freely share information, form opinions, and voluntarily participate in the political process. According to Kim et al, the themes and topics of an individual’s political conversation in the private sphere come from outside that sphere – for example, the political system and the political world. The output of these conversations is public opinions, voting decisions, participatory action and influence on the political world (Kim et al., 1999).

However, the program this paper is proposing for public discourse on TV news is not a discursive system, because such programs need to be planned ahead by certain institutions. Therefore, before this paper moves to a different topic, it is important to compare the discursive discourse and purposively planned discourse.

In *The structural transformation of the public sphere*, Habermas (1962) explained that a culture-debating public has changed to become a culture-consuming public. During the eighteenth century, the public sphere emerged from numerous salons, clubs and coffeehouses, where private individuals gathered to talk about society and politics. In such places, individuals were not engaged in the cycle of production and consumption. However, since the nineteenth century, rational public debate started to be formally organized as an adult education. “Religious academies, political forums, literary organizations, radio stations, publishers, and associations” started to hold staged panel discussions as their secondary business. During the previous era, individuals had gotten together purely as “human beings,” but now, these individuals have to pay money to be part of that public discourse. According to Habermas, such a commercialized and carefully implemented discussion has lost its “publicist function” (p. 164). Habermas hardly believed in a revival of the critical public sphere, and thought that free democratic communication could hardly be found in contemporary society.

Discursive interaction has been also questioned for its knowledge and competence by Dahlgren (2002). In the contemporary era, most people receive the information from the media as grounds for their discursive interaction, but the media provide only a fractional part of the world. Therefore, individuals’ discursive interaction is imperfect.

If discursive civic and political interaction among citizens in this 21st century seems rather idealistic, why not purposively provide such an environment, despite all these limitations mentioned by Habermas? The following section will discuss some positive factors of intentionally designed public discourse programs.

Beneficial factors

Deliberatively planned public discourse on television news has a positive influence for both individuals and the society at large. First, a public assembly to discuss media can build social relations among individuals and help them to have positive social interactions. According to Herbert Blumer's (Blumer, 1972) theory of symbolic interactionism, social interaction not only allows information exchange, but also generates meaning. While many ordinary citizens do not easily find ways to engage themselves in deliberative democracy, individuals can expand their chances of participating in deliberative democracy by engaging in social interaction. In *Personal Influence: the part played by people in the flow of mass communication*, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) cite the studies of Matilda and John Riley. These studies found that children with weak social relations preferred action and violent radio programs more than children with strong relationships with their peers. However, correlations between social relationships and media effects are likely not restricted to children. Katz and Lazarsfeld also referred to a study by Suchman which suggests that opinions from others influence an individual's media behavior. From these studies, the authors concluded that social pressures encourage individuals "to expose themselves and to be receptive to the influence of communications" (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

The second positive influence of deliberatively planned public discourse on television news is expanded sense of community through exposure to diversity. A community with its independent members who share conceptions, principles, interests, and values are considered as a public (Smith & Hyde, 1991). John Dewey (1927) once wrote that the public seems to be lost and asked, "where is the public which these officials are supposed to represent?" (p. 117). The same questions can be asked about contemporary society:

Where can the public be found, besides on the election date?

Following the definition of Smith et al., the majority of contemporary Americans seem to have very restricted public experiences. Even though the United States is a very diverse country, individuals rarely get the opportunity to share their values and opinions with other groups of people. Individuals are restricted in their geographic and social boundaries, where people with similar socio-cultural backgrounds associate. While minorities and dissenters are likely to become voiceless aliens in the society (Barber, 1984), individuals from diverse background can share their value and problems from different perspectives (Yankelovich, 1999).

Furthermore, a community can be created by public discourse on television news through a sense of belonging with the concept of “we.” In *Strong democracy*, Barber (1984) defined citizens as “we-thinker”; this “we” can be engendered through engaging in activities with others and can envision “our” common future and common goods. Kim et al. (1999) also referred to Noelle-Neumann’s suggestion that possessing a sense of belonging to a majority promotes political conversation.

Yankelovich (1999) also argued that dialogue has a civilizing influence because it brings individuals into a community. Absence of dialogue can stereotype others, which can hinder accepting and understanding others. However, good dialogue leads to goodwill and in-depth understanding of each other (Yankelovich, 1999). This being-with-others, as a public, provides people with “the necessary and emotionally inspired background for seeing, interpreting, and becoming involved with things and with others, and for repeating this process time and again, perhaps ‘for the better’” (Smith & Hyde, 1991). The third positive influence of public discourse on television news is providing a venue

for media education. Before the discussion, educators can deliver knowledge about media institutions, their activities, and their effects on society. Such knowledge, which is often discussed in the media education curriculum, can help citizens to demystify the message (Feuerstein, 1999) and the media institutions.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, Kim et al. (1999) and Habermas (1962; 1987) might disagree with the idea of planned public gathering, sponsored by some institution, to talk about television because it is not discursive which is a quality of deliberative democracy. However, in *the magic of dialogue*, Yankelovich (1999) presented numerous examples of dialogue in artificially organized meetings that provide insightful understandings of others and of circumstances. These dialogues lead to opportunities to address problems in American civilization and perhaps suggest some solutions, because they provide shared understanding and insights on the issue (Yankelovich, 1999).

Media education programs for adults

This program of public discourse on television news is only one example of a media education program for adults. Numerous other education programs can and should be proposed to develop media literacy skills including reading, writing, and comprehensive understanding of the media. One example is Cape Cod Community Television, where community members can construct television programs. Such media production experiences allow participants to see behind the media, and criticize media rhetoric and representations (King & Mele, 1999). Various organizations and institutions can organize and practice these programs, such as:

- *Adult educational services and general continuing education* as well as those associated with professional fields and trades;
- *Media industries* that desire new and expanding audiences who effectively use the media;
- *Colleges and universities* with communications, media studies and journalism programs that value adult education and truly understand the need for media literate adults;
- *Professional societies and organizations* in media industries and related fields;
- *Philanthropic foundations*, both those generally concerned with the public weal and those especially related to media industries;
- *Public interest organizations* and groups, especially those concerned with public affairs; and
- *Major social institutions* concerned with vibrant media and with covering their endeavors: business, education, technology, health care, and others, including religious and political organizations. (Dennis, 2004)

Discussion

In order to discuss how public discourse on television news can be an effective adult media literacy program, the researcher tried to cover the area of discourse studies, deliberative democracy and media education. However, as the researcher tried to expand the theoretical scope for each area, the foci of each field were often found as beyond the scope of this paper. For instance, most academic writings on deliberative democracy dealt with rhetoric and most studies on media literacy focused on children and adolescents. Therefore, in order to build a fundamental ground for the issue and to focus on the topic,

the researcher purposively selected parts of the larger theory and scholarly work

On the other hand, combining different theories around the topic gives insight so that we may see what is lacking in each theory. Academic works done on the topic of adult media literacy programs only dealt with the necessity of media literacy programs for adults and some possible structures of the programs. In-depth studies of how these programs can specifically serve adults need to be done. In addition, even though the researcher looked at only a handful of resources among numerous literatures on deliberative democracy, all of the literature on the issue did not give practical methodologies for improving deliberative democracy. Even the articles that specifically mentioned the close relationship between news media usage and political conversation (Kim et al., 1999) did not provide details of how the political talk driven by the news media can be linked to deliberative democracy. This term “deliberative democracy” becomes very vague when it comes to practical use. Also as mentioned earlier, research needs to be done on whether the limited knowledge and competence from news media and the sensational texts can still encourage individuals to contribute for deliberative democracy. Therefore, research which thoroughly covers the area of media literacy, adult education and deliberative democracy needs to be done. And such research should be applied to develop effective adult media education programs for deliberative democracy.

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