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News and the empowerment of citizens

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ABSTRACT   This article argues that we need to take the democratic promise of news seriously and find ways to advance that promise. It begins by considering both the importance of news to democratic citizenship, and its failure to deliver in ways that do not compound social inequalities. It argues against more optimistic accounts of the state of democratic citizenship, but finds that the notion of public service journalism often lapses into a class-specific discourse for the information-rich. Meanwhile, current news values are contradictory and incoherent, allowing us space to build upon the democratic ideals in journalistic philosophy. The article then argues that citizenship should be brought from the margins of news to its centre. This means implicating citizenship into the news's mode of address, of going beyond the narrow narratives of current news values and addressing broad citizenship concerns.

KEYWORDS   *citizenship, democracy, journalism, news values*

Introduction

This article argues that we might re-examine the nature of 'news' in order to enhance the quality of citizenship. This involves moving beyond the question of how well news 'serves the needs of democracy' (Bennett, 2005: 9), to consider what it would look like if it did. Of course, the idealism of such an endeavour is tempered by the art of the possible, and the aim here is to begin a discussion of practical and strategic forms of intervention.

The concern here is with dominant news culture rather than with alternative forms of journalism or the potential of the 'citizen journalist'. This is not to belittle the alternatives: on the contrary, there is no doubt that the growth of the world wide web and cheap digital technology has raised serious questions about the viability of journalistic practice and what constitutes its professionalism. But while some might wish the whole edifice of mainstream news culture to come crashing down, it is also an apposite time to ask hard questions about the social utility of news. To put

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it bluntly, journalism needs to justify itself, which opens up opportunities for asking how journalism might serve us better.

Citizenship and news

This article will begin by briefly outlining three assumptions that inform the discussion that follows. The first and most profound of these is to assert the importance of informed citizenship. In short, the health of a democracy depends upon the quality of information that people receive about politics and public affairs, leading to meaningful political discourse and deliberation (Cohen, 1997; Iyengar, 1991; McNair, 1994, 2005; Neuman et al., 1992).

If this is a familiar assertion in political communications research, it is less familiar in the cultural studies literature, where there is suspicion of too narrow a definition of citizenship and the political realm. Cultural studies stresses the political significance of the cultural sphere, including what David Morley (1986) calls 'the politics of the living room'. Therefore, we should take care to avoid resurrecting what Peter Dahlgren (1992: 12) calls a 'pre-Freudian conception of rational man', which characterizes both journalism research and establishment models of the public sphere (Murdock, 1999).

Further, we should guard against the approach taken in much citizenship instruction, with its emphasis on process and abstraction rather than 'on a politics of involvement and experience' (Gifford, 2004: 157). But if cultural studies stretches our notion of citizenship and the political, it does not negate the importance of informing political discourse. So while we should be inclusive about what constitutes 'meaningful political discourse', we need to hold on to the notion that active citizenship depends upon information, that not all information is equally useful and that citizenship as a mode of being is distinct, and therefore informed in distinctive ways.

So, for example, if we want to promote the idea of democratic media, this means much more than giving people access to the technology, for example, to watch television programmes on demand. Informed cultural citizenship involves understanding the range of cultural possibilities, and ultimately, having a voice in defining the scope of those cultural possibilities. For this reason, it could be argued, media literacy is not just about the way that we consume media but the policy framework within which it is produced (Lewis and Jhally, 1998).

The idealism behind this proposition is not held universally. Famously, Walter Lippmann (1922) and Joseph Schumpeter (1976) have advanced more élitist versions of democracy in which citizens play only peripheral roles. More recently, scholars have suggested either that citizens can function democratically without much information (Popkin, 1991), or that this ideal is simply unrealistic (Schudson, 1998). These 'top-down' versions of democracy are anathema to a cultural studies approach, and the notion

that a well-informed citizenry is essential to a democratic society remains not only a widely-held principle but (in theory at least) one of the most progressive dominant ideas of our age.

The second and more straightforward assumption is that one of the main sources of information available to people about politics and public affairs is the news media, especially broadcast news. This is not to say that, as Jonathan Gray (2005) points out, politics is not present throughout popular culture, or that politics is equated with parliamentary democracy. In discussing youth culture, David Buckingham (2000) argues that citizenship cuts across public and domestic domains, and even in the public domain, voting is just one form in which citizenship can be expressed. But news, more than any other cultural form, carries the burden of defining the world in which citizens operate.

For some time, surveys have established the importance of television as an information source (Gunter, 1987). Despite the growth and potential of new media − notably the internet − this remains true (Hargreaves and Thomas, 2002). While news organizations are reluctant sometimes to accept the responsibility that comes with this role, it is implicit in the core principles of journalistic philosophy, whereby attempts to shackle or censor the news media are seen as threats to democracy itself. It is also implicit in arguments that it is the market, as well as governments, which can circumscribe the content of news (Curran and Seaton, 1997; Herman and Chomsky, 1988).

The third assumption is that, despite a plethora of news and information outlets, the levels of knowledge about politics and public affairs in most countries are often low and/or unevenly distributed, generally in favour of more privileged social groups. Again, while some would argue that sound democratic decisions can be made without knowing a great deal (Sniderman et al., 1991), most studies suggest that generally, most people are often sparsely informed − or else misinformed − about politics and public affairs (Kull, 2004; Kull et al., 2003; Lemert, 1992; Lewis, 2001; Lewis and Speers, 2003; Neuman et al., 1992; Scammell, 2004). It is also clear that there is a relationship between knowledge, social inclusion and power (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996; Nie et al., 1996; Norris, 2000).

Together, these assumptions indicate that democracy remains at best a work-in-progress. For whatever reason, many people − especially those furthest from positions of power − are not gathering enough information from the news media to inform active forms of citizenship or democratic decisions. Since this is the premise of this article, let it be added briefly that it is not one reached hastily or without consideration of other possibilities.

Ciizenship, knowledge and power

There are various literatures that promote a more optimistic view of the state of citizenship. Within political science, there is a body of work that

argues that we do not need a great deal of knowledge about politics to construct plausible political opinions, and that widely-shared, basic information can provide the building blocks for meaningful and 'rational' citizenship (Page and Shapiro, 1992; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman et al., 1991; Zaller, 1992). These positions tend to have a limited notion of what constitutes 'rational citizenship' and a benign view of the media as information providers (for a more detailed discussion of this literature, see Lewis, 2001).

We find other strains of optimism within cultural studies, which has stressed often that media audiences are active and engaged, and that the political realm encompasses much of the cultural sphere (not just 'news'). Similarly, many within the sociology of science have applied much the same arguments against a 'deficit model', in which public ignorance of science is pitched against forms of scientific expertise and found wanting (Dornan, 1999; Weingold, 2001). Both are reactions against positions that tend to privilege certain kinds of knowledge and which, at the same time, acknowledge only certain forms of citizen activity. So, for example, we can see the ways in which television comedy contributes to people's understandings of the public sphere (Gray, 2005). Or we can interpret the fact that most people in the UK incorrectly assume that global warming is caused by heat coming through the hole in the ozone layer (Hargreaves et al., 2003) to be indicative of a more profound popular understanding that links the hole in the ozone layer and global warming (since both are environmental problems created by human activity).

Yet such optimism glosses over important inequities in information distribution. It tends to romanticize popular or lay understandings or assume that the building blocks for political opinions are well founded. This is problematic on two counts. First, there are too many instances where forms of power are linked to inequities in knowledge distribution, whether it is the ability to vote for candidates whose policy positions a person shares (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1996), or to construct meaningful responses to opinion polls (Bourdieu, 1979).

Second, many of the basic assumptions that inform political opinions are unreliable. For example, studies by the Program on International Policy Attitudes in the United States have found that, at key political periods, many people in the US hold assumptions about topical political issues that are simply incorrect — such as the widespread belief that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (Kull et al., 2003), or the assumption by many people who voted for George Bush in 2004 that Bush backed (rather than opposed) the Kyoto Treaty on climate change, along with many other international treaties (Kull, 2004). Similarly, surveys by MORI (2000) demonstrate that the hostility to refugees and asylum-seekers in Britain is informed by a series of mistaken assumptions. Whatever else they do, these assumptions impoverish the state of public discourse and make it easier for political élites to

pursue initiatives which otherwise might meet with a measure of popular resistance (Lewis, 2001).

Let it be stressed here that a fixed curriculum of political education is not being advocated. As others have suggested, the kinds of information favoured in school civics lessons often may be too abstract and arcane to be very helpful to most people (Gifford, 2004; Neuman et al., 1992), especially if it is based on the idea that there is a set of political truths that transcend public discourse which would set us free, were we to know them. There is no flat plain of knowledge, no equality of facts, either in terms of plausibility or usefulness. Yet this is where it becomes difficult, because it forces us to address questions that élitist models of democracy or optimistic accounts of citizenship can happily ignore. Specifically, what kinds of knowledge or understanding can promote active and engaged citizenship?

While this question is addressed often only obliquely, it is implicit in *any* critique of the news media, since such critiques all presuppose that some things are more useful for people to know than others. It is in this context that this article shall attempt to develop the discussion. However, before doing so, it will consider briefly the role that the news media play in the state of citizenship.

News matters

As Laurie Ouellette (2002) has argued, dominant assumptions about citizenship tend to blame popular taste for the failings of a media system rather than the system itself. In other words, if a cultural industry becomes stale, repetitive, formulaic and lacking in diversity, this is simply in response to audience demands. Similarly, if news neglects issues of political or public concern in favour of crime and celebrity culture, this is because people are bored by the former and interested in the latter. In short, the public gets what the public wants. Since the issue here is not so much that information is unavailable (although it may be), merely that it is not widely communicated and absorbed, the impetus is placed on individuals to find things out for themselves. As the argument runs, so long as the information is out there somewhere, the news media can be scarcely culpable if people choose to read about or watch something else.

The thrust of this argument is that the weak link in a democratic system is the citizen. The problem with this position is not that it is pessimistic (although it is), but that it is ahistorical. It assumes a fixed and limited subjectivity, a society in which the 'vulgar masses' are always with us. Indeed, the implication here is the knowledge required for people to function as active citizens will be limited always to certain social groups. And if we limit our vision in this way, then inevitably the notion of well informed citizenry will be elusive.

It also assumes that the news media exist in a perfect market system in   307

which all options are available, unsullied by the needs of advertisers and profit maximization. In short, while the system is responsive to demand, those demands come not just from audiences but advertisers (hence the demise of newspapers with large audiences but insufficient advertising revenue), and are subject to measures of profitability which may work against the notion of public interest or investigative journalism. Indeed, while consumers en masse can influence production, as an individual the citizen is the least powerful voice in the complexity of practices that shape a media system. Unlike the owner, editor, producer or journalist, they are able to express themselves only through the monosyllabic language of consumer purchases.

Of course, we cannot force people to be interested or active citizens. But we can think about how to create the conditions in which active citizenship may flourish. This touches many aspects of social life, of which the news media are an important part by common practice. Or to put it more positively, if citizens are to take a full part in democratic life, in practice the news media will need to play a pivotal role in providing them with the information with which to do so. In this sense, news is a vital part of any democratic project (Glasser, 1999; Rosen, 1999).

News imperatives

There is a widely-understood awareness of the democratic importance of news, yet journalism as a profession is strangely elusive about its purpose. It is an endeavour with no agreed or standard set of objectives. It has no clear theoretical tradition or philosophical principles (Franklin, 1997) – on the contrary, it is suspicious of theory or philosophy (some of the most withering attacks on media studies come from journalists). It is almost as if serious analysis is antithetical to a profession which values constant movement. Yet lurking beneath many debates about the news media are a series of unspoken assumptions about the function of news. For example, the debate about 'dumbing down' presupposes, in rather vague terms, that the function of news is to inform and that 'dumber' news is less informative that 'smart' news. But inform people about what, exactly?

The sociology of news production has given us a fairly clear idea about the various ideas that feed 'news values', as well as the various conventions that inform the manufacture of news (Born, 2005; Gans, 1980; Schlesinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1978). This work demonstrates that there is nothing very coherent about these values, and when we search for motivations or procedures we often find contradictions. So, for example, the common idea that the news is about matters of public importance has very little to do with a value system that prizes conflict and violence ('if it bleeds, it leads').

Many of the contradictory impulses that shape modern journalism are a product of its identity as a public information service channelled into a commercial form. The history of journalism has been characterized in part

by this tension, and by the early 20th century it became clear that people appeared to find some forms of public information – such as crime or sport – more entertaining than others (Curran and Seaton, 1997; Harrison, 2006; Williams, 1998). At the same time, the competitive ethos underpinning this enterprise creates its own demands.

One of the most deeply embedded of these is what used to be called the 'scoop' – the journalist's holy grail of being the first to uncover a story. In one sense, the 'scoop' is a matching of notions of public interest with commercialism: 'we will tell you what you need to know before any of our competitors do'. But while the spirit of the scoop remains an almost unquestioned notion within journalism, it has evolved in ways that have lost sight of audience need or desire. Indeed, some of its contemporary manifestations have become faintly fetishistic and inward-looking.

The point here is that, unguided by any clear rationale, many of the ideas informing journalism – what does or does not make a 'good story' – have an almost arbitrary quality. Unlike other professions, journalism requires comparatively little training and certainly no depth of under-standing, often resorting to crude notions such as 'instinct' or having an 'eye for a good story'. This does not mean that there is no set of common understandings among journalists, simply that these understandings are no more than the sum of their parts. Yet despite the pressures of commer-cialism, the idea that news is there to inform citizenship, to tell people what they need to know, remains a powerful part of this mix (McNair, 2005).

Reclaiming the notion of public service

Although I share the scepticism of many about the way in which the spirit of public interest journalism is often invoked (see for example, Dahlgren, 1992; Franklin, 1997), it could be argued that as a principle it is something to be embraced. Its instincts are democratic and it is philosophically allied to notions of citizenship rather than consumerism. However, the forms that public affairs journalism have adopted have not always been helpful in promoting citizenship. It is not just that the notion of 'public interest' has been downgraded – from something being 'in the public interest' to being something that 'the public are interested in' – but that it has become socially divisive. In short, the public affairs tradition has tended to become a class-specific discourse.

In her book on the failure of public television in the US, Laurie Ouel-lette recounts a telling moment in the development of an approach that doomed US public television to be watched by small groups of professionals. As a public television executive commented about covering a political convention: 'If [President] Gerry Ford is giving a very dull speech and a riot is going outside, we will stay with Gerry Ford' (Ouellette, 2002: 121). In doing its democratic duty, US public television pursues a

dull but worthy course, whose aesthetic values are bound up with class distinctions about what it means to be a 'good citizen' (Bourdieu, 1984).

The assumption here is that, despite the longstanding links between news and entertainment (Harrison, 2006), the pursuit of the popular is somehow in contradiction with serious public affairs content. As John Hartley (1996) argues, this is to conflate the popular with populism. Indeed, this idea has become so deeply inscribed in recent journalistic thinking that it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus on the one hand, we have news as entertainment, in which public affairs issues are replaced by crime, sport and celebrity, and on the other, 'serious news', which focuses on politics and public affairs. While the two genres overlap in various ways, the first is associated clearly with a popular, working-class audience, the second with a more well-heeled, affluent and professional audience. This explains in part why knowledge of politics and public affairs is strongly related to social class and is implicit in many of the arguments against 'dumbing down' (when any attempt to make news more lively and engaging is regarded with suspicion).

If this distinction seems almost natural or inevitable, it has not always been the case. When a popular, working-class press developed in Britain in the first half of the 19th century, it was self-consciously and overtly political, with democracy and citizenship central to its concerns (Curran and Seaton, 1997; Williams, 1998). Even in the mid-20th century, Britain's most popular newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, had a strong public interest remit delivered in a popular format. People are interested in things that matter to them or to their beliefs about society; the failure of modern public affairs journalism is that it has not been very good at stimulating, engaging or developing this interest to those outside the 'virtuous circle' of news followers (Norris, 2000).

This does not mean abandoning the notion of public service – it is, in many ways, all that stands in the way of a rampant consumerism – but of redefining it in way that does not privilege the information-rich. This involves asking what kinds of information, in practice, will enhance the quality of citizenship in ways that are genuinely egalitarian? And while there is no simple answer, it is a useful starting point for thinking about the social or democratic value of news, rather than the fairly arbitrary set of news values that inform current practice.

Informing citizenship as a news value

So far, it has been suggested that there is some scope for intervention in the incoherent world of news values, since in the current climate it is not at all clear – beyond high-minded declarations about the revelation of truth – what the point of journalism is. A great deal of what passes for news is stories whose only significance is that they may interest or amuse us. The issue here is not that news is entertaining – far from it – but that

it often has no implications for citizenship (and any pretensions that it does are generally spurious). As Peter Golding, writing about the British tabloid press, comments wryly:

> How much do we learn of the complex relationship between the intelligence service and the state in a story about 'MI5 Wife in Secret Love Split' (Sun 18 December 1991) . . . Equally significant for our understanding of the changing structure of family life in contemporary society would be such front page features as 'Sex Op Sister Stole My Man' (Daily Star, 7 December 1992). (Golding, 1994: 464)

In short, while there are many interesting possibilities here, a story such as 'Sex Op Sister Stole My Man' is not written to address audiences as anything other than spectators. These stories are self-referential – they do not reveal or uncover a great deal beyond themselves.

If these stories are mandated by the economics of news production – they provide a kind of light entertainment – nonetheless they are legitimated by the mish-mash of ideas that constitute news values. After all, we read them in newspapers. This legitimization is important, since it underscores the whole practice of news consumption. Part of the reason we follow news is because we like to feel that we are being informed about what is going on in the world. But once we begin to interrogate these values, it becomes apparent that many of them serve neither a commercial nor a public interest purpose. They have become (to use an old Althusserian phrase) relatively autonomous from either function. Their operational presence is justified by a tautology: it is news simply because it meets our definition of what news is – what Peter Dahlgren (1992: 1) calls 'the aura of the self-evident'. Or, as David Altheide bluntly puts it: 'news is whatever news people say it is' (1986: 17). Thus defined, it need serve no other purpose.

As a consequence, sometimes news values can teeter on the edge of the absurd, bound to enterprises so removed from any clear rationale that their importance to journalists is matched only by their general pointlessness. We now have the contemporary spectacle of news channels competing with each other to be the 'first with breaking news', a struggle which is generally of little interest to anyone outside journalism, since the difference between news channels is rarely more than a few minutes and most 'breaking news' stories are hardly matters of great urgency. Indeed, form has superseded content, and the ability to brand something as 'breaking news' often defines its presence, while most of what is called 'breaking news' is either predictable or routine (Lewis et al., 2005a). If we were being uncharitable, it is what we might call 'the schlock of the new'.

Thus when Richard Lambert, in his review of the BBC News 24 channel, wrote that 'an absolute determination to break news first must be at the heart of everything the channel does' (2002: 14), he was echoing   311

journalistic wisdom. But his recommendation in practical terms is that journalism is not about making sense of a story, assessing its significance or presenting it in ways that engage viewers – all of which take at least a little bit of time. Since the audience is not sitting there waiting for things to happen (and is certainly not fretting in case they hear about a ministerial announcement or a development in a murder trial two minutes later than if they had been watching the other channel), such urgency becomes an imperative whose meaning scarcely carries beyond the news world.

What we might argue for, instead, is a set of news values in which citizenship is foregrounded. In our study of the way that citizens are represented on television news in the US and UK (Lewis et al., 2005b), we explored the various ways in which citizens are represented or invoked routinely – whether as part of an opinion poll, 'vox pop' or simply by journalists referring to the public. The picture painted by our findings was that television news tends to represent citizens as passive and apolitical. People were shown reacting rather than proposing, offering descriptions rather than opinions, recounting experiences rather than ideas. In sum, politics was something done to people rather than something that people did.

In a sample of more than 4000 broadcast news items from the UK and the US in which citizenship was invoked, we found that in only 4 percent of instances did this involve citizens making even vague proposals about what should be done in the world (Lewis et al., 2005b). For example, we found many stories about public dissatisfaction with the British railway system. And while we heard (or heard about) people grumbling about rail services, at no point did we find any reference to the widespread public support for returning the railways to public ownership – something that a number of polls suggest is a popular view in the UK.

It is not that citizens are excluded from the news – far from it: we found that, in one form or another, the news makes frequent reference to citizens or publics – more that they are excluded from its action. But since they do not propose, initiate, debate or engage, they are like 'extras' in the news drama, providing background and mood, with little agency. Thus citizenship is implicated in the discourse of news but in forms that are neither enticing nor engaging, and never centre stage.

This is, in part, a consequence of the 'top-down' structure of news reporting, which is so well established that it has become part of journalistic routine. News – especially news about politics – tends to be about what important people say and do (e.g. Gans, 1980; Glasgow Media Group, 1980; Hall et al., 1978; Paletz and Entman, 1981; Tuchman, 1978). It has become a well-choreographed dance between media and politicians, a spectator sport in which citizens play little part (Croteau and Hoynes, 1997). Or, as David Buckingham puts it, politics is seen merely as a 'kind of dishonest game, which has little relevance to . . . everyday lives and concerns' (2000: 202). The problem with this 'top-down' structure is not its dishonesty – after all, we live in a fairly 'top-down' world – but that it systematically

positions citizens as audiences or observers of the news world rather than as participants. Thus it is that the main 'citizens' slot' on the news is the vox pop (we found that around 40% of references to citizenship in our news sample were vox pops; Lewis et al., 2005b), whereby someone is plucked from the audience for a brief moment to respond to a news world rather than actively participate in it.

This is not to say that the news should ignore those with power, abandon notions of expertise or create news stories simply to provide citizens with speaking parts. However, there is no doubt that more news about citizens involved in community or social concerns certainly puts flesh on the idea of citizenship. For example, on 19 January 2006, Sky News carried a five-minute piece by Anthony Jay which was, in effect, a 'how to' guide to citizen protest (albeit from the respectable and comfortable position of an inhabitant of a bucolic English village). The story provided practical and pithy advice on what to do when government or business trampled on community concerns. Whatever its limits, from a citizenship perspective, this new story was informative, relevant and engaging.

Implication of citizenship in the broader landscape

David Buckingham has written persuasively of the need for news to 'find ways of establishing the *relevance* of politics and of *connecting* the 'micro-politics' of personal experience with the 'macro-politics' of the public sphere' (2000: 221; emphasis in original). But as he points out, this is about more than simply sugaring the pill or jazzing up the news with what Barbara Ehrenreich has called the 'erotic promise' (1990: 47) of consumerism. It could be argued that for many news items, it is more a question of implicating the citizen in the story, either conceptually or literally.

This involves asking not only 'why and how does this matter to people?' but also questioning a story's *raison d'être*, asking why it is useful for people to know something and what the information it contains adds to the quality of citizenship. Of course, this is partly a matter of debate. There is no prescribed syllabus of citizenship knowledge and, as has been suggested here, this does not mean constructing a hierarchy of citizenship practices or values. It is more a matter of approach, whereby citizenship interests become integrated within a story's mode of address. So, for example, a story about a leadership contest within a political party is assumed to have news value, and 'public interest' is understood generally as no more than a question of which candidate we might find most likable. Indeed, fearful of boring the audience and mindful of the appeal of 'human interest', reporters invariably feel some obligation to focus on tangible personality differences rather than what are seen as more abstract questions of policy. Thus it has become a well-established tradition of political coverage to avoid too much discussion of concrete policy   313

differences (Deacon et al., 2001; Jackson, 1996). But if we begin our coverage by asking what difference it actually makes to people's lives if one candidate wins rather than another, it might become a very different kind of contest: one where what is at stake is less about the fortunes of one politician or another, and more about the way that we and others live.

This does not mean engaging in worthy, dispassionate policy debates, as some of the high-minded advocates of serious journalism would have it, but turning policy into a kind of human interest story. For it is not just a question of implicating citizenship, but of doing so in a way that is less likely to compound disparities in knowledge. All too often, the 'ideal viewer' of serious news is what we might call the already-informed citizen: someone who knows the background, history and significance of a story, who will appreciate the detail and specificity of the latest instalment. For those outside this virtuous circle, this mode of address is at best dull and difficult, and at worst, profoundly alienating (Lewis, 2001; Neuman et al., 1992).

I have argued elsewhere (Lewis, 1991, 2003) that the narrative structure of news – or lack thereof – compounds this problem. Unlike most forms of popular culture, most news stories are not structured in ways that engage or involve audiences in a story's development. But the point here has more to do with perspective than with form. In a recent study of news channels (Lewis et al., 2005a), we attempted to distinguish between two very different ways of providing context and analysis in broadcast news: one which spoke only to the already-informed citizen, and one which addressed a broader notion of citizenship.

The first, which we called 'narrow issue analysis', assumed rather than explored a story's significance, providing detail and discussion within a narrow frame. This might be a story that focused on the latest parliamentary controversy or explored the circumstances of a recent crime. We found that this kind of analysis was by far the most common on UK news (examples were found on 40% of the news items on the BBC Ten O'Clock News and on around 10% to 15% of news items on the British news channels; Lewis et al., 2005a).

The second, which we called 'big picture analysis', made some attempt to explain a story's context, meaning or significance. This might involve the use of historical context, regional or international comparisons or simply some discussion of why the news story mattered. This might mean allowing citizens more space to develop the political agenda or looking at a crime in its wider context, considering who was at risk and how this compared with other risks that they might face (Lewis et al., 2005a). This kind of context may be much more useful to most viewers, but is rarely provided. We found examples of these forms of context on fewer than 10 percent of items on the BBC Ten O'Clock News, and hardly at all on the British news channels (Lewis et al., 2005a).

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address difficult and confusing, providing information about the 'big picture' is likely to inspire interest and engagement (Neuman et al., 1992; Philo, 2002). This is in part because the first addresses the audience as a dispassionate spectator, while the second has a notion of citizenship inscribed within its structure.

The proposal here is not to create two kinds of news – one for the well-informed, one for the rest – but to reconceive news by focusing on what it is useful for people to know. The problem with narrow issue analysis is not only that it assumes interest and understanding, but that it does not place citizenship at its centre. For example, when we looked at news coverage of cuts in British military spending in July 2004, we found a number of stories that provided a narrow focus on the issue, with commentary and, at times, detail from military figures and analysts (Lewis et al., 2005a). For those with vested interests, these stories may have connected to larger issues but they failed to ask what was at stake for most citizens. Indeed, for most viewers, it would be hard to make much sense of this story. At no point in the coverage did we get a sense of how the British military budget compares with European countries (it remains the largest), or more profoundly, its purpose in the post-Cold War world. And yet, remarkably, the rationale behind current military spending or policy is rarely discussed. This lack of public discussion could have provided an opportunity for journalists to address the bigger picture, asking what kinds of military risks the UK faces in a post-Soviet world and what kind of spending is needed to meet them. This would be to address the citizen directly, either as a taxpayer or as a citizen of a nation-state.

In some ways, for a journalist to begin by questioning the significance of a story from a citizen's perspective is a radical departure from existing practice. The focus on the spectacular rather than the typical – endemic in news coverage of crime, for example – rarely implicates citizenship in useful or informative ways. Similarly, our analysis of the 'news interview' on British news channels suggested that the aim of many interviews is less to illuminate a subject than to create or develop a story (by extracting a newsworthy quote from the interviewee). Put another way, their function is to generate heat rather than light (Lewis et al., 2005a).

This is reflected further in the sources favoured by news, which prefers those with power rather than information. We found that, between them, people from science and medicine, universities, think tanks and research bodies, non-governmental organizations, government and other public agencies, accounted for only 7 to 12 percent of sources on British news channels, while politicians alone accounted for between 20 and 30 percent (Lewis et al., 2005a). And yet it is the first group who are more likely to provide a wider political context. The challenge is to find ways of turning this perspective – rather than the assertions of those in power – into headlines.

And yet the notion that the news is there to inform citizenship – what   315

is referred to in the US as 'public journalism' (Glasser, 1999; Rosen, 1999) – remains remarkably robust, in theory if not in practice. It is for this reason that many of the shibboleths of journalistic theory, notions of objectivity which implicitly invoke democracy and citizenship, should be seen less as problematic (the traditional scholarly view) than as an opportunity. Thus when 'journalists . . . cling tenaciously to the view that news at its best renders the world transparent' (Glasser and Marken, 2005: 265), we can dismiss such a view easily as philosophically naive, pointing out the many ways in which journalistic practice is an ideological practice embedded within power structures. However, without this idealism, journalism is diminished and there is little to prevent notions of citizenship becoming suffused by consumerist imperatives.

Instead, there is an opening to work with and develop those democratic instincts that inform journalistic values. While the many difficulties in such a project cannot be underestimated, the alternative is to ignore the democratic promise of news, abandoning it to market forces or an idea of public journalism as a discourse for the already-informed.

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