
Introduction: the demotic turn

[**demotic** (adjective): 'of or for the common people']

It has become commonplace to notice the increasing number of opportunities for ordinary people to appear in the media. From the *vox pops* in news bulletins to the celebrity that comes with participation in reality TV, from calling up your local talk radio host to competing for stardom in *Idol*, from posting your favourite images on Facebook to becoming one of the notorious Web 'cam-girls' – the possibilities of media visibility seem endless. The causes are many: the pervasiveness of celebrity, shifts in television from drama to 'live' formats, and the interactivity of Web 2.0, among them. The ordinary citizen's access to a media profile that was unavailable before the digital revolution has encouraged some to argue that we have entered an unprecedented era of networked information, which in turn provides opportunities for participation that are so widespread and various that they constitute a form of democratization – an opening up of the media on a scale that invites us to think of it as a new form of political enfranchisement.

At the same time, the character of much of this access and some of its results must compromise this possibility. The 'cam-girls' web-sites, I have suggested elsewhere (Turner, 2004), are only one click away from porn sites; the proliferation of blogs is not solely driven by progressive or liberal political attitudes – it houses political extremism just as comfortably; the media's interest in their reality and game show contestants is at least as exploitative as it is enabling; and the rise in the political influence of talk radio in the USA, Europe and Australia has been marked by the divisive, and commercial, deployment of that power rather than by its building of broad-based consensus. One can't jump to the conclusion that a widening of access necessarily carries with it a democratic politics.

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Furthermore, the strategies through which the media industries have developed popular access to their programming formats are themselves worth examining. This is an age in which the media have been especially active in constructing celebrity, and other forms of identity as well, as the available means to a commercial end. At the same time, the consumption of media has become so individualized and fragmented that the notion that the media should bear some kind of social or community responsibility seems, to many, anachronistic. Paradoxically, expectations that the media might serve the public good seem to have been displaced at the very same time when media performances by members of the public have never been more visible. The function of the media, for so long connected to assumptions about the role of the fourth estate, about its implication in the construction of the citizen, and about the importance of the provision of information to the public as a means of enabling the proper functioning of the democratic state, now looks as if it must be explained in relation to a range of other, quite different, assumptions.

In *Understanding Celebrity* (2004), I challenged the democratic implications so frequently read into the politics of media access in contemporary cultural and media studies. In doing this, I was following a line of thought that had occupied me for some years, but which had been initiated by a comment made by a colleague, Liz Jacka, in response to an earlier discussion which had taken for granted a connection between ordinary people's representation in the media and a process of democratization. Jacka insisted, and I think rightly, that this was a step too far: that while there was certainly clear evidence of an increased demotic access to the media, one needed more evidence of the actual politics involved in each instance before one was entitled to assume that it served democratic purposes. In *Understanding Celebrity*, I coined the term 'the demotic turn' as a preferred means of referring to the increasing visibility of the 'ordinary person' as they have turned themselves into media content through celebrity culture, reality TV, DIY websites, talk radio and the like. In the context of that book, it was used as a means of understanding the proliferation of celebrity across the media since the 1980s, as well as celebrity's colonization of the expectations of everyday life in contemporary western societies, particularly among teenagers and young adults. Where there was a

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crossover between certain aspects of reality TV and the production of celebrity, I was concerned to argue for the importance of recognizing how identity was being constituted in such formats. Even though the contestants on *Idol* may be competing for the chance to become a successful singer, we frequently find them arguing their case to the judges in terms of their essential selves – their intrinsic star quality – rather than in terms of their musical skills or abilities. Much of the participation in reality TV, then, is aimed at a certain kind of recognition of the self.

This book is aimed at further developing and applying the idea of the ‘demotic turn’, not only because of its implication in the construction of celebrity but also, more importantly, because of its implication in what I regard as a new field of relations opening up between media and culture. The media, and in particular television, have developed new capacities for constructing identities and these capacities are producing social effects that are about more than just the production of *Big Brother*. Indeed, I want to argue that the function of the media has mutated as it has participated, increasingly directly, in the construction of cultural identity as one of its primary spheres of activity. As I have put it elsewhere (Turner, 2006), where the media might once have operated as a mediator or perhaps a broadcaster of cultural identities, its contemporary function is closer to that of a translator or even an author of identities.

I acknowledge that some of this book will be critical of the politics of participation it examines: it does seem to me, for example, that there are instances where it would be appropriate if the activity of certain populist talk radio hosts was recognized as constituting an abuse of media power rather than an instance of the robust operation of a democratic public sphere. More generally, however, the book’s primary, and broader, objective is to examine closely what is going on in these new media developments, and what kinds of potentials they actually offer to the ordinary people involved. Since so much industry and academic discussion has been focused upon an optimistic reading of these developments which highlights their democratizing potential, and since my interest is precisely in testing and qualifying the claims made for them, I am involved in an inescapably critical project. That still seems to me a fundamental objective for a cultural studies analysis of the media – as Charlotte

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Brunsdon has put it in another context, of a cultural criticism which is 'attentive to, but not seduced by', current conditions (2009: 30).

What follows, then, is *not* just another anti-tabloidization argument, an account of the media's 'dumbing down', or a contribution to the venerable tradition of moralizing critiques of popular media (Hartley, 2009: 18) that made cultural studies necessary in the first place. Rather, my objective is to ask if there has been a structural shift in what the media are doing, some (not all) of the time, and if the explosion of celebrity, reality TV, and user-generated content on the Web and so on, that has generated this new visibility of ordinary people in the media as performers and producers actually reflects something more fundamental than contemporary media fashion. If it does, then that would be worth knowing.

There has been much debate about the topics taken up in this book. As we will see in the following chapters, there are strongly contrasting views on what we should make of, for instance, the cultural effects of reality TV, the pervasiveness of celebrity, and the populism of the radio shock-jocks. There are also vigorous debates about exactly how much influence ordinary people actually exert as they increase their participation in the media. Depending on who you read, for instance, 'citizen journalism' can be the saviour of the democratic fourth estate or a failed utopian dream; downloading video online can be the future of television or an overblown sideshow; user-generated content on the internet can be *the* core activity for the next generation of media industries or merely the plaything of self-promoting early adopters. The changes I am examining have been variously described as top-down, bottom-up, and a combination of both.

This is particularly the case in relation to the more participatory and interactive media formats such as reality TV and the various capacities of Web 2.0. In these cases, especially, the diversity of competing positions seems matched by the intensity with which each is argued. To take a clear position on any of this material – and I would have to say particularly one that is skeptical about the discourse of emancipation, democratization and liberation that has become the default position for so many media and cultural studies' accounts of Web 2.0 lately – is to enter into a very testy debate. And yet, despite the competing certainties which abound, the issues are deeply complicated and their playing out in any

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specific instance fundamentally contingent. Furthermore, in a context where change is rapid and where only limited verifiable independent research is available, there is a problem of proportion; that is, while there is at least an element of truth in most of what is being said, the excessive claims that are characteristically made on behalf of each new technological development clearly test some readers' credulity and patience:

The focus is on micro-events of insignificance that are puffed into an historical revelation of biblical importance. Bookshelves are filled with tipping points and wisdom of crowds. Chris Anderson's *The Long Tail* captures an argument so simple it can be conveyed through the title. He investigated Amazon, eBay and online music retailers to show how 'endless choice' is creating 'unlimited demand'. He argues that the focus on best-sellers is misguided and the internet has changed 'everything'. Technological determinism is fused with neoliberalism, where the market promises endless growth and choice. (Brabazon, 2008: 16)

A further consideration is that many of the arguments made about ordinary people's access to the media, and to the cultural, creative and participatory opportunities this provides, are made by those who are far from 'ordinary' themselves: cultural, political, academic and media elites, sometimes personally or professionally identified with the media program or capacity they are boosting. Often, as I will argue throughout the following chapters, what these arguments need most of all is a reality check that can run against the influence of activist advocacy, geeky enthusiasm, and industry spin.

The topics dealt with in this book include the rise of celebrity, reality TV, news and current affairs journalism on- and offline, citizen journalism, talk radio, blogging, and user-generated content online. The participation of ordinary people is fundamental to all of these media activities. As we go through the book, however, it becomes clear that while the participation of ordinary people is continually claimed as the benefit to be realized from each new development, their actual participation becomes less and less the focus of investigation and research – indeed simply less of an explicit issue – in the relevant academic debates. So while the role of ordinary people in reality TV (dealt with in Chapters 1 and 2)

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is a central debate in discussions of this format – and there are many views on what needs to be said about that – the role of ordinary people in discussions of user-generated content online (see Chapter 5) is almost entirely notional. That is, while their participation is hailed as a fundamental attribute of the uses of these technologies, there is almost nothing written about, and very little empirical research¹ which examines, what use ‘actual’ ordinary people might make of them, and how they might reap the benefits assumed to flow from their access.²

That is a lot to leave out, because there are so many different kinds of ordinary people we need to consider: those who are cast to appear on reality TV, those who get to talk to radio hosts on air, those who contribute their comments to blogs online, those who use YouTube to watch their favourite DIY video, or those who use their MySpace page to broadcast their identities around the world. And, then, of course, there are the many, many more, who participate by just watching, reading or listening.

In this book, I use the demotic turn as a means of examining what I argue is a significant new development in how the media participate in the production of culture. The examples discussed will be drawn from an international range of locations and research. In Chapter 1: (*Ordinary People: celebrity, tabloid culture and the function of the media.*) I outline the central argument of this volume. While the idea of the demotic turn emerges as a way of describing the increased participation of ordinary people in the media, it has a more widespread potential for helping us to better understand the cultural function of a commercial media system that is more focused on the distribution of entertainment and the production of cultural identities than ever before. The chapter differentiates the approach taken in this book from familiar taste-based critiques of the media, such as those most commonly identified with the notion of tabloidization. While the concept of tabloidization is implicated here – in many ways, the demotic turn is an alternative, less perjorative and more productive, way of understanding some of the shifts in content and participation often noticed in critiques of the tabloid – the focus is not primarily on the content of media texts or the taste-based cultures within which they might be marketed. Rather, the long history of discussions of the ‘tabloid’ alerts us to some of the territories we

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might examine for the signs of a fundamental shift in the media's cultural function.

Chapter 2 deals with reality TV and the construction of cultural identities. Earlier, I suggested that the media no longer operate as merely the mediators of cultural identities but now serve the function of a translator or author of cultural identities. Reality TV in its various guises has been a key site for the examination of this issue, and for debates about the various kinds of cultural influences such programming formats, and the particular way in which they have been performed in recent years, may well have on the cultures which consume them. The success of transnational hybrid formats such as *Big Brother* and *Idol* has introduced new, and more urgent, dimensions to what had become relatively familiar debates about the globalization, 'glocalization' or homogenization of culture. The fact these formats claim to provide us with unmediated presentations of 'everyday' life has generated concern about their influence over how they ask us, implicitly, to think about our lives, about the norms which govern them and the possibilities they offer.

These concerns have been especially urgent in non-western developed nations where these formats have built large audiences and where, as we shall see in Chapter 2, there is often a massive demand from prospective participants. The gap between the cultural systems embedded in the television format, no matter how 'localized' or 'indigenized' it has become, and the cultural systems of the nation-state in which it is broadcast, is often profound – raising new questions about the role that television plays in constructing culture. This chapter will examine these issues as they have been dealt with in western television studies, before then going on to discuss significant examples from the East Asian region and the Middle East, where the conflict between the identities constructed through television and those constructed through the nation-state has been explicitly addressed by both government and the public.

Chapter 3, (*Redefining Journalism: citizens, blogs and the rise of opinion*) addresses a number of the key concerns in what has become a serious transnational debate about the future of the western, fourth estate, version of journalism. As the traditional print media lose much of their readership, and as news and current affairs on radio and television lose much of their audience in many

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locations, the opportunities provided by developments online have attracted increasing attention. Public journalism projects, citizen journalism ventures, and the political blog have all been nominated by various analysts as providing the direction for a future in which the disappearance of traditional journalism is regarded as more or less inevitable.

The context for these developments is not only that of a commercial crisis for the large news industries. These industries are also facing a crisis of credibility and authority: the perception that the mainstream news media have lost their connection to the community, and that they are no longer sufficiently reliable as an independent source of information and analysis. The work of the amateur or pro-am reporter and the opinions of the blogger have gained an audience because of what is seen to be their connection to ordinary people – that is, their demotic dimension. In many of these locations, however, the presentation of news has merged with the presentation of opinion and there is little interest in policing the boundaries between them by restoring the editorial function. Indeed, there is a sense that the open declaration of opinion is in many ways a more honest, reliable and acceptable tactic than what had come to be seen as a spurious performance of objectivity. The attraction of opinion, rather than verifiable information, is reflected in the increasing numbers using political blogs as news sources, as well as participating through posting comments and engaging in conversations with those others who also choose to participate in this way. This trend has affected the approach taken by the mainstream news media as well as they now look for ways to turn news into entertainment; in particular, the US TV network FOX has achieved commercial success by presenting highly opinionated news and current affairs.

The highwater mark for opinionated news and current affairs, however, can be found in the populist formations of talk radio that dominate the airwaves in (at least) the USA, Australia, and some parts of Europe. The development of talk radio in the United States and Australia has seen radio news and current affairs turned over to the audience, moderated by a host who is responsible for making the programme entertaining. The caller's voice supplies the programme with its demotic authenticity, and the host with his (and it is usually his) legitimacy. Chapter 4

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(*Talk Radio, Populism and the Demotic Voice*) examines several case studies: the role of 'talkback' radio in Australia in what came to be called the Cronulla riots (so-called 'race riots' in Sydney in 2005) and the populist talk radio host Rush Limbaugh in the USA. While the rationale for talk radio has been explicitly egalitarian – the Australian example is talked of as 'God's great leveller' – it is notable that what has happened in practice has often been far from liberal or tolerant. American talk radio is dominated by deeply conservative political voices and the Australian example has been accused of directly inflaming the racial tensions that resulted in the Cronulla riots. The participation of the public in these programmes is fundamental to the format, and yet the diversity and tolerance one might expect to flow from such participation are definitely not markers of the format's performance in practice. Indeed, the commercial point of the programmes seems to be to employ populist politics as a means of specifying its audience, even if that results in sharpening political divisions within the wider listening public. At the end of this chapter, the distinction between populism and the demotic is examined, before debates about populism and cultural studies – debates first held in the early 1990s – are reprised.

The point of reviewing these debates is to contextualize the way that cultural and media studies have tended to deal with the political potentials of Web 2.0 and, in particular, user-generated content online. Chapter 5 (*Revenge of the Nerds: user-generated content online*) acknowledges the fact that DIY celebrities, social networking sites, blogging and DIY video online have altered the balance of power between the producer and the consumer in ways that repay close examination. Those who would argue that user-generated content is the clearest sign of the reclamation of consumer sovereignty within the mediascape certainly have plenty of arresting evidence to draw upon – even if it is geographically concentrated in the affluent West. However, the chapter also notes the exorbitance and indeed the self-interestedness of some of the claims that have been made for the cultural and political benefits of the digital revolution. There are clear areas of exaggeration in the standard accounts of digital media which emerge from the industry and the academy to do with the scale of the

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shift to the 'produser', for instance, or the challenge posed to traditional media such as television by online video. There is also the undeniable fact that these arguments are products of a western media elite: white, male, early adopters, probably residing in the USA, are presenting arguments for which they claim a global provenance. On the other hand, the scale of the international take-up of social networking suggests that there are genuinely new functions for the media under development which would repay research and closer analysis. This chapter, then, examines these issues in relation to user-generated content online – blogging, DIY videos on YouTube and social networking.

It has become commonplace to describe the current mediascape as constituting the infrastructure for an 'information society'. In my concluding chapter (*The Entertainment Age: media consumption today*) I suggest that the overwhelming global trend towards the commercialization of the media as entertainment industries encourages an alternative formulation – that we are now entering an age in which entertainment has become increasingly important. In light of that context, this chapter sets out to understand what kinds of functions the media now serve politically and culturally as they divest themselves of the responsibilities of being providers of information to their citizenry; as they increasingly see themselves as commercial entities responsible to their shareholders rather than the community or nation; as they find new ways to incorporate user-generated content into their menus of entertainment; and as they increasingly invest in the production of social identities as a means of pump-priming the market for other products. These shifts in the media's idea of themselves have not reduced their social, political and cultural centrality. Indeed, as I have outlined in the preceding chapters, in some ways this has taken on an even more active cultural role. That cultural role, however, is largely driven by the media's commercial interests and thinking about what this might mean is the focus of the final chapter.

Notes

- 1 Indeed, in one case, an academic blogger in Australia made an extraordinary argument, within a highly defensive review of a book

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critical of the claims of 'digital democracy', which implied that the Web is so dynamic, and research materials so 'static', that there is virtually no point in subjecting the Web to academic research (Bahnisch, 2009)!

- 2 An interesting exception to this that I am not going to have space to deal with here, is the programme of research projects connected to the digital storytelling movement, interventions at the community level which clearly do focus on the development of the participatory media skills of 'actual' ordinary people (see Hartley and McWilliam, 2009a; McWilliam, 2009; Tacchi, 2009).