

Dahlgren, Peter:

THE POLITICAL WEB: MEDIA, PARTICIPATION AND ALTERNATIVE DEMOCRACY.

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The work of Peter Dahlgren, Professor of Media and Communication Studies at the University of Lund (Sweden) focuses on media and democracy, and the theme of democratic participation particularly as it relates to digital media. These themes may also be found in his most recent publications, including *Media and Political Engagement* (2009), the co-edited volume *Young People, ICT's and Democracy* (2010) and the most recent – *The Political Web: Media, Participation and Alternative Democracy* (2013). Because of his interest in democratic participation and civic engagement, his work influences not just the broad field of media studies, but the field of political communication (or political participation), as well.

His newest book *The Political Web: Media, Participation and Alternative Democracy* is divided into three main sections. The first points out recent changes in a number of democratic countries dealing with widespread political crises. Crises of political elites, parties and corruption have led to people's estrangement from governments and the political process. The development of neoliberalism and subsequent depolitization has brought a decline in participation in the formal political arena and a growing civic apathy, with distrust towards the political parties and the system. Many citizens feel that political parties offer no real options and

traditional political participation is declining. In this arrangement, they are finding new routes to engagement and participation and novel ways of being citizens, in the belief that alternative politics offers a significant response to these developments. Dahlgren writes of the erosion of some aspects of democracy and the emergence of alternative democratic paths, 'alternative democracy' or 'counter-democracy' incorporating NGOs, citizens' networks, social movements, activists, etc., as political actors outside party structures (and not corresponding to elitist models of democracy).

Dahlgren like many others (e.g. Bakardjieva 2009, Castells 2012, Lievrouw 2012, Papacharissi 2010) speaks of the emerging (and more informal) modes of civic participation, discussing the role of the new media in these novel activities and a changing political culture. The democratic potential of (new) media has been debated for some time and one often encounters broad generalizations or simplifications, not just in public discourse. New media are often viewed as the solution to many problems. But Dahlgren argues that new media can't fix weaknesses in democratic systems (more media don't automatically imply more democracy), because democratic participation involves more than media access and interactivity. Although optimistic visions of empowering minor political groups and transforming power relations have not come to pass, new media do also have something to offer. They can help citizens and civil society organisations (in a number of events) attain their objectives (for example, the anti-globalisation and Occupy protests, the Arab Spring).

It cannot be said that Dahlgren is either pessimistic or optimistic about the impact of the new media on political participation and engagement. Rather, he rejects techno-cen-

trism and argues for a more careful examination of the relationship between participation and the entire media environment. Dahlgren's reading of the Occupy Wall Street protests clearly emphasizes this context-based approach (in the second section of the book), noting the phenomenon of the streets combined with a strong media component that began at Zuccotti Park 17 September 2011. This chapter (among others) raises the question of the relationship between activities of this type and institutionalized politics. And he argues that participation must be seen in light of a broad understanding of the political (not one limited to the institutionalized political arena) in order to understand the changes.

Political engagement nowadays tends to be more personal than collective and much political behaviour has its origin in the private sphere. As an everyday phenomenon, the web may be seen as a suitable area for the new political contestation by virtue of its democratic character, the boundaries it affords between public and private space, its availability, opportunities for networking, etc. Although Dahlgren also refers to the weaknesses and dark side of new media in relation to political engagement (i.e., radical or extreme movements), in the next two chapters he focuses on the role played by public intellectuals and journalists and how the new media relates to them. By comparison, e.g., with Maria Bakardjieva's (2009) concept of 'subactivism', defined as a form of civic preparation in the everyday lives of people rather than comprising political acts, Dahlgren's attention is focused on other kinds of actors. In the age of self-publishing and the web as communication space, public intellectuals can reach informed audiences who will pay attention to them more easily and thus impact public opinion. He argues that public intellectuals have traditionally

'banked on a degree of optimism and engagement on the part of citizens' (Dahlgren 2013: 106) (on the other hand, Dahlgren draws attention to risk of the erosion of 'intellectual' side of this phenomenon in the new media environment). Dahlgren tries to describe the transformation of the public intellectual (and the emergence of a new variety, the 'web intellectual'), but in an effort to present a broad picture of change in the area of participation and its shaping factors, he also addresses many other interesting topics to do with participation, such as civic subjectivity, cosmopolitanism, global activism and journalism.

In the book's final section, Dahlgren clearly and systematically discusses critical approaches to participation and media analysis. He introduces key concepts and major traditions shaping our understanding of the subject (e.g., liberal, deliberative) and democratic agency, as well as critical research.

The book is highly interesting and makes an important contribution to the debate not just about the changing media environment, but also changes in democratic societies and political cultures. Dahlgren doesn't offer one-sided argumentation, rather he outlines some possibilities that the future may hold. In the book he calls for more precise approach to the research into recent changes in society and the role of the new media in it. He particularly suggests that political participation in media should be mapped onto the relevant broad changes in society (and culture), to cover activities taking place outside traditional political structures (e.g., the role of public intellectuals). The emphasis should thus be laid on the growing area of alternative politics (with respect to web-based agency and practices) and the significance for democratic systems.

Sources:

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Alena Macková
International Institute of Political Science of
Masaryk University