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MEDIA, DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY: THE CHALLENGE OF DIGITAL MEDIA

There is a long tradition of academic research addressing the role of media in democracy both in terms of formal political processes and broader political culture. Academic researchers have been concerned both to study the different ways in which the media are implicated in the political and to develop normative criteria by which the political role of the media can be evaluated. Recent developments in media and communications technology have combined with changes in democracy as it spreads to different social and cultural contexts across the world and to regional and global governance to raise new challenges concerning the role of media in democracy. At a time of transformation, perhaps, academics have a responsibility to bring theory and evidence into public debate and understanding. In this article I first outline some key features of the relation between media and democracy, focusing on how digital media are challenging concepts of political engagement. This is followed by a discussion of the different potential contributions made by communications and media researchers in this area using examples from reports of work conducted by members of the COST Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies (TATS). These contributions demonstrate the contribution of research to framing and interpreting social processes, providing evidence for particular policy concerns or initiatives and of academics developing ways of combining their academic interests with a more interactive or dialogic engagement with a variety of stakeholders.

1. INTRODUCTION

A central theme in the COST Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies (TATS) is the role of the media in democracy and in particular its role in supporting civil society (the formal and informal institutions that support public life and underpin democratic participation) and civic culture (ways of living that enhance engagement in social and political life). In other words, media have always played a dual role – as part of the institutional infrastructure of democracy (as the ‘third estate’, reporting and commenting on government activity and providing information to the public) and as a context, or public forum, in which people can express their opinions and voices and potentially participate and deliberate in democratic politics¹. The media, in increasingly diverse forms

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¹ G.C. Christians, T.L. Glasser, D. McQuail, D. Kaarle Nordenstreng, R.A. White, *Normative Theories of the Media: Journalism in Democratic Societies*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

and across different scales are implicated in both formal politics (e.g., e-government) and in the informal ways in which individuals and groups participate in the political². While democracy predates modern media of communication it is difficult to imagine democracy without media in contemporary mediatised societies³. These questions have been given a renewed purchase in contemporary liberal democratic societies because of the way that the internet and digital media are transforming politics and political culture. In this article, I will first map out some of the main contours of these transformations as they affect public engagement in politics and then draw on the work of members of the COST Action TATS as examples of academics' contributions to the analysis and of the different ways in which they have worked with and for stakeholders as part of this research. The latter part of the article draws on the idea that, in this period of transformation, academics are both aiming to contribute to academic theory and research but also wish to engage with policy makers, commerce, civil society bodies and the public aiming to give their work public value.

2. THE MEDIA, DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Despite this long history of interrelation between media and democracy⁴, all of the terms implicated in that relation, democracy, civil society, civic culture, media are in transition due to technological, social, economic, cultural and political change. In societies with a long history of liberal capitalism (in the Global North and West) democracy is challenged by increasing economic inequality – the proliferation of social difference so that the alignment between identity and political affiliation is blurred – and the corresponding lack of a credible sovereign public⁵. Yet these were the assumptions that legitimated welfare state liberalism: that economic inequality would not be so extreme as to affect political influence or participation, that there was a broad public consensus that legitimated state interventions in the lives of citizens and that an active civil society and engaged political culture reinforced political consent⁶. In the post-soviet and Central and Eastern European democracies the development of civil society and the opening up of the media were equally important aspects of the development of democracy (see the individual report of Gintaras Aleknonis⁷).

If it were possible to think that the media might play a role as part of the infrastructure of civil society in welfare liberalism then what are we to make to the increasingly global and regional organisation of media industries? Thompson⁸ and Held⁹ see these

² C. Mouffe, *Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism*, Political Science Series, Working Paper 72, Vienna: Institute for Advanced Studies, 2000. Available at: http://www.ihs.ac.at/publications/pol/pw_72.pdf (accessed October 2012).

³ A. Hepp, *Cultures of Mediatization*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013; S. Halvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*, London: Routledge, 2013.

⁴ J. Keane, *The Media and Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991; J. Lichtenberg (ed.), *Democracy and the Mass Media*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

⁵ S.K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, 80-82.

⁶ S. Mau, "Welfare Regimes and the Norms of Social Exchange", *Current Sociology*, 52, 1 (2004): 53-74.

⁷ G. Aleknonis, *How My Research Has Been Useful, or Could Be Useful, for which Stakeholders in the Field? Some Reflections*, 2012.

⁸ J. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.

⁹ D. Held, *Models of Democracy* (3rd ed.), Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

developments as a critical disjuncture in the potential for democratic politics challenging the autonomy of nation states and the sustainability of civil society as an “autonomous centre of culture, able to foster and sustain a national identity, with a secure environment for its people”¹⁰. Held¹¹ points to the ways in which the global media industry has developed, with great rapidity, over recent years marked by the spread of English as the *lingua franca* of many areas of global transaction and culture, by telecoms extending across national borders with extraordinary speed, by the internet connecting people and intuitions across the globe, by international tourism continuing to expand rapidly, commerce and communications spreading across borders. As Held¹² argues, it is too early to argue that these developments have technologically determined a global media led culture. However, these developments make important incursions into the cultural and communicative coherence of the nation state and limit the capacity of political and civil society institutions to sustain a national identity and an engaged political culture¹³. Consequently, the idea of a sovereign public, living in a bounded territory and having a high degree of autonomy to set against the autonomy of the state and the power of commerce is supplemented by a multiplicity of dispersed orders of governance and of political culture.

The challenges to civil society in this environment are as acute as the challenges to governments and, at the least, as Held¹⁴ suggests, if democratic politics is to be realised through a vibrant civil society in this context then that will take new forms not as a global public sphere but something more complex and nuanced consisting of a dialectic relationship between autonomous associations at a number of scales (local, national, regional and global) and across a range of political concerns (social, cultural, economic and environmental). A question from a media and communications perspective is whether digital media technologies which contribute to the shaping of these challenging conditions for democracy might also enhance the potential for individuals to join in mediated forms of association which can sustain political autonomy at different levels from the local to the global.

For academic theories these considerations require a rethink of the relations between media and civil society and the importance of this for democracy, which has predominantly been conducted to date through engagement and criticism of public sphere theory, particularly Habermas’¹⁵ account of the Bourgeois public sphere (for an overview, see Lunt and Livingstone)¹⁶. Even though there are many criticisms of Habermas¹⁷, his idea of a public sphere of discussion and debate in which legitimate public opinion might emerge to contest established power remains influential. Habermas compared the role of the media in early, disorganised capitalism of the late eighteenth century with that of mid twentieth century commodity capitalism. His thesis was that in the early days of capitalism the emergence of a new class formation (the Bourgeoisie) took

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* [1962], Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.

¹⁶ P. Lunt, S. Livingstone, “Media Studies’ Fascination with the Concept of the Public Sphere: Critical Reflections and Emerging Debates”, *Media, Culture and Society*, 35 (2013), 1: 87-96.

¹⁷ C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992; P. Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

place in the context of a cultural public sphere that enabled, through public discussion of matters of social significance a new kind of reflexivity based on reciprocal dialogue and debate by private individuals coming together in public to come to a point of view on the pressing issues of the day. Equally significant, Habermas argued that the developing institutions of liberal democracy were influenced by this culture, reflected in the development of a complementary relationship between civil society and representative parliamentary democracy, debate, inquiry and political agency based on commitment to the resolution of difference in the public interest¹⁸.

The historical voracity of this account has been criticised as having a lack of consideration of those excluded from Bourgeois culture and Habermas's claims for reasoning as a universal claim to legitimacy¹⁹. Nevertheless, the key elements of Habermas's formulation of public sphere theory are relatively uncontested: the idea of a connection between the culture of everyday life and the political sphere, the importance of civil society as a means of encouraging individuals to engage in reflection and of a parallel between legitimate forms of public engagement and political debate all reflected in democratic institutions. Although Habermas can be thought of as a liberal theorist, his theory of the public sphere can be regarded as a view of radical democracy. The public sphere potentially links everyday life to politics so that not only public opinion on substantive issues is taken into account by the political sphere but also that the political institutions reflect broader political culture standing in a dialectic relationship between public reason and political debate as politics becomes a process that formalises public deliberation. Significantly, for Habermas²⁰, early print media were at the centre of this as the means through which the results of public discussion could be publicised and thereby influence the political sphere. In contrast, according to Habermas, by the mid twentieth century, through a process that reflects Weber's account of rationalisation, the media became businesses and no longer provided the means to articulate emergent political opinions so that the dialectic relation between public deliberation and parliamentary politics was severed. Political decision making was rationalised and communicated to the people rather than emerging from the people²¹.

Dahlgren²² has written persuasively about the need to go beyond Habermas²³ formulation of public sphere theory to engage with the more nuanced and diverse mediated civic cultures that provide different routes to public participation and thereby create the context for potential engagement in public and political spheres. He argues that mediated civic cultures are diverse in form, loosely corresponding to the different media environments in which they occur and reflecting different media logics. He therefore makes useful distinctions between different popular cultural forms on TV that enrol audiences in subtly different forms of public participation and contrasts these to online contexts as forms of embodied agency that are forerunners of the conditions for engagement in these more diverse and dispersed public spheres. He also explores the way that digital

¹⁸ Lunt, Livingstone, "Media Studies' Fascination with the Concept of the Public Sphere: Critical Reflections and Emerging Debates".

¹⁹ N. Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", in C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge (MA)/London: The MIT Press, 1992: 109-142.

²⁰ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.

²¹ Lunt, Livingstone, "Media Studies' Fascination with the Concept of the Public Sphere: Critical Reflections and Emerging Debates".

²² P. Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

²³ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*.

media are influencing media logics themselves using the case of the transition to online journalism. In this vein, also, Dahlgren²⁴ begins to explore the role of mediated civil society bodies (such as NGOs and online activist movements) in creating a link between the deliberations of those who are represented by, or participate in, such bodies and new forms of governance at the local, national, regional (European) and global levels.

3. THE TASK FOR MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION RESEARCHERS

From the above discussion we can see that there is a large task facing media and communication researchers who wish to examine the mediatisation of civil society and its relation to politics and political culture. We can no longer expect to articulate a definitive cluster of institutions and associations at the national level (although these are still vitally important), but will also need to include mediation of civic culture in popular cultural forms as well as in factual broadcasting at local and national levels. In addition, we can expect a revitalised localism, a recasting of national level civil society, strengthening regional and global forms of association. In addition, and perhaps most important, we should, following Held²⁵ and Giddens²⁶ examine the ways in which diverse forms of association at different levels engaged in different spheres of public life connect and play off each other, and whether this connects with political institutions in a new dialectic. We should, at the same time, register a note of caution, as well illustrated by Couldry²⁷ in his analysis of the fate of voice in neoliberalism. The very forces that provide the context for a nuanced account of deliberation in different civic cultures at different levels are those that Couldry reminds us are behind the apparently increasing dominance of neoliberalism around the world. In this article I will look at research conducted by members of the TATS COST Action to examine how they are thinking about the role of the media in supporting civil society and culture in contemporary mediated society and the implications that their research potentially has for this important area of media policy.

4. EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH WITH SOCIAL PURPOSE FROM THE COST TATS ACTION

Academics who have been part of Working Group 2 (WG2) of the COST TATS Action have focused on research on media audiences, interaction and participation. The WG2 Task Force on Public Voice and Mediated Participation has particularly addressed the issues discussed above in relation to the media and public life. In this article, I will discuss examples of research by members of the COST TATS action, on the basis of 26 individual reports written by WG2 members, that address questions related to the role of the media in democracy and in particular in the relationship between emerging forms of digital media and public engagement in politics and political culture. In this discussion I will examine the different ways in which academic research can contribute to non-academic audiences concerning these important transformations in the relationship between media, politics and society. In particular, I will focus on the question of how

²⁴ Dahlgren, *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication, and Democracy*.

²⁵ Held, *Models of Democracy*.

²⁶ A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.

²⁷ N. Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*, London: Sage, 2010.

the internet and digital media might sustain an engaged political culture and enhance the relationship between media and democracy.

To bring some order to the diverse ways in which this research potentially provides public value I will adopt the framework suggested by Lunt and Livingstone²⁸ following Nutley et al.'s²⁹ classification of research as a contribution to evidence based policy. Nutley et al.³⁰ suggest six kinds of research that can potentially inform evidence based policy: 1) Knowledge Driven Research, 2) Problem Solving Research, 3) Political Uses of Research, 4) Tactical Uses of Research, 5) The Interactive Model (sustained interaction between research and user communities), 6) The Enlightenment Model (transcending instrumental uses of research through a constructive engagement with user communities).

I will adapt this framework in this context since the focus of research is not only to provide evidence for policymakers, but on broader social value or impact. First is the case of independent academic research conducted for theoretical reasons but which addresses issues of public concern and aims to contribute to public debate and discussion (knowledge driven research). Second, research can address a specific project as consultancy, problem solving research or aimed at providing evidence for policy debate (consultancy/problem solving research). Third, research can be developed in interaction with stakeholders including governments, civil society bodies, firms or the public (interactive or action research). Within this classification of research activities we can also identify different potential or actual user communities that are institutionally grounded (policy makers or media organisations), civil society bodies, individuals or groups in the public.

5. CASE STUDIES

1) *Knowledge Driven Research*

Most of the statements produced by researchers in WG2 are examples of knowledge driven research – reflecting the work of academics producing research that they intend to be of value to policy makers, commerce, civil society bodies and the public; basic research that addresses issues of public concern. In the COST TATS Action, academics are conducting wide ranging research examining the implications of transformations related to globalisation and the development of digital media for the longer running concern of democratic participation as discussed above.

A good example of this approach is the work of Peter Dahlgren which focuses on mapping and understanding different uses of media in political participation by citizens, examining the ways that both linear and digital media are used in participation. In his individual report he writes: “I would also suggest that this work is of relevance to journalists who write about these matters, and citizens generally who wish to deepen their understanding of some of the key transformations affecting democracy”³¹. Dahlgren

²⁸ P. Lunt, S. Livingstone, *Media Regulation: Governance and the Interests of Citizens and Consumers*, London: Sage, 2012.

²⁹ S.M. Nutley, I. Walter, I., H.T.O. Davies, *Using Evidence: How Research Can Inform Public Services*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2007.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ P. Dahlgren, *Individual Report: The Relevance of My Research*, 2012.

argues that it is a central part of academic work to recognise the intellectual challenge of the mediatisation of public life as being one which requires us to analytically weave together aspects of social structures and institutions with media technologies, the socio-cultural parameters of media environments, and concrete organisation and collectivities. It is then our responsibility to disseminate the results of our reflections to interested civil society actors who are concerned about enhancing participation in their activities – and thereby in democracy – and use media as an important tool in this regard.

Dahlgren also suggests that rather than being limited to the immediate practical issues facing civil society and the links between media and democracy in a digital world, academics are working to a longer time horizon and seek “to contribute to deeper reflection and the development of long-term strategies based on a more profound understanding of participation, the role of the media, and how both of these relate to democracy”³². Members of WG2 of the TATS COST Action also identify that academics have a role to play as public intellectuals – especially at a time of social and technical transformation. In his individual report, Gintaras Aleknonis³³ discusses the important role that academics in smaller countries have to play in both researching the transformations in public life linked to mediatisation in their countries (in this case Lithuania) and to do this as part of cosmopolitan culture thereby contributing to the dissemination of international research. In this, academics recognise the importance of universities not only as centres of learning but as critical institutions in the public sphere³⁴.

Academics can provide the evidence for public policy through their research. A good example from the COST TATS Action is provided by Annika Bergström³⁵ discussing her research into political participation through online media in Sweden. The interplay between policy relevant research and theory is emphasised as interpretations of the potential of digital media are informed by political theories of deliberation. Bergström reports on her studies of how political parties and candidates use online media and the importance of an emerging understanding of digital democracy. Her studies using national representative surveys are of interest to political organisations and public authorities who aim to navigate the new media environment. The focus here is on the emerging knowledge and understanding of how the convergence of linear and digital media are impacting on politics. The potential public value that this research has as “an invaluable public resource for reflection on social, political and economic processes”³⁶.

Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic³⁷ discusses in her individual report the potential value that research can have in restoring trust in communications arising from the increased transparency that digital media brings to public life. The research focuses “on how political actors and European institutions can use the Internet in order to promote political engagement and participation, and develop trust in the EU institutions, diminish the democratic deficit and motivate European citizens to participate in politics”³⁸. This focus on political institutions is balanced by research on audiences from Norway on:

³² *Ibid.*

³³ G. Aleknonis, *How My Research Has Been Useful, or Could Be Useful, for which Stakeholders in the Field? Some Reflections*, 2012.

³⁴ Lunt, Livingstone, *Media Regulation: Governance and the Interests of Citizens and Consumers*.

³⁵ A. Bergström, *Audience Interactivity and Participation*, 2012.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Vesnic-Alujevic, *How My Research Has Been Useful, or Could Be Useful, for which Stakeholders in the Field?*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

...how politically engaged young people use social media for political purposes. Based on focus group interviews with Norwegian teenagers, the project shows that social media have become an important platform for young people to participate in political activities³⁹.

And in Spain: “[...] two of the most important projects with these topics are ‘Digital convergence on media 2006-2009’ and ‘eDemocracy in 2008 political campaign’, both with public funding. A research line linking eDemocracy with Digital Journalism will let to have a deeper approach to the unresolved question about the role of media in a new ecosystem of political participation with/for media”⁴⁰.

The relevance of such research comes partly from the range of potential stakeholders and the sense that this is a critical moment of transition in public life in which the media are playing a key role:

My research is directed towards the broad theme of democratic participation, with a point of departure in media use. [...] Thus, the stakeholders here can be seen as a vast array of civil society and political organisations, networks, collectivities, and movements⁴¹.

2) Problem Solving/Consultancy Research

Some researchers in the COST TATS Action conduct research that is oriented to problem solving or consultancy research focused on particular policy issues including in support of the companies that aim to adapt to or to enter the convergent media market.

Mikko Villi⁴² for example, works with stakeholders in the media in Finland, including media companies, news organisations and media publishing houses, addressing the strategic challenges these face in converging media markets. His research aims to help broadcasters adapt news sites to fit the needs of the digital audience and to help media companies to develop web 2.0 interactive strategies. He discusses the new approaches to audiences that are required in convergence culture as combining social curation and user-distributed content. This research also involves examining audiences as hyperlocal news content creators based on studies in the Helsinki area. It is complemented by input into the design of mobile and online ICT solutions to enable local contributions and guidance on how firms can develop crowdsourcing methods and feedback mechanisms based on academic research into participation preferences and motivations and improving the quality of online contributions⁴³. This work in Finland is part of a broader collaboration between industry and academia in which academics play a key role in research and development for industry as part of a national research project “Next Media”. Similar collaborative research is reported by Tanja Storsul⁴⁴ which aims to help companies to combine innovations in online services with viable business models.

Working with stakeholders to enhance interactivity through digital media occurs at different levels of abstraction including government agencies. For example, a key stakeholder in innovations that might use the advantages of digital media to increase political engagement is the political sphere. Several COST TATS Action members are engaged in

³⁹ T. Storsul, *Individual Report on “The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice”*, 2012.

⁴⁰ J.-M. Noguera Vivo, *The Radical Need of a Better Understanding about Participation*, 2012.

⁴¹ Dahlgren, *Individual Report on “The Relevance of My Research”*.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ H. Väättäjä, *The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice*, 2012.

⁴⁴ Storsul, *Individual Report on “The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice”*.

this type of research, producing ideas based on the study of online interaction to give advice to governments⁴⁵. Similarly, again at the European level, academic studies are used to develop models of good and bad practice⁴⁶. These researchers aim to develop a framework for analyzing EU participation initiatives, developing the concept of ‘participatory genres’ in which initiatives such as consultations, petitions and expert juries are examined as “organising structures”⁴⁷. The potential to build shared expectations about these initiatives in participation is seen to be central to their success. They argue that:

For the initiators, designers, promoters and managers of participatory projects, it is thus important to clarify the participatory genres that structure their initiative and to provide the citizens with all the resources needed in order to enact appropriate genres. The participatory genre approach is relevant to associations and citizens as well: recognising, enacting and negotiating appropriate participatory genres are important conditions to participation⁴⁸.

At a national level, Miroljub Radojković⁴⁹ deploys academic analysis on cross-media in his work advising the Serbian government on the drafting of cultural policy legislation. Nico Carpentier⁵⁰ has collaborated with the Czech media regulator RRTV, in assisting them to organise a consultation about the implementation of community media regulation: “This collaboration resulted in a green paper, co-authored by RRTV staff, community media activists and myself. The results of this consultation are currently being processed, although it is likely that a slower process of conscience-raising will have to be organised”⁵¹.

We have seen that academics understand their basic research as influencing public knowledge and debate, that they are involved in a variety of collaborative projects with a range of stakeholders. In addition, as a result of their research expertise, academics are often called upon to provide policy advice or act as consultants.

3) *The Interactive Model*

There are a number of projects being conducted by members of the COST TATS Action that have developed an interactive model, which combines stakeholder engagement in research, an attempt to influence deliberation and public debate, has a collaborative orientation with stakeholders and looks to develop an interaction with user communities as part of the research. Nico Carpentier⁵² uses (together with Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt and Pille Runnel) action research in a civil society context, Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone⁵³ developed an interactive research project (published in their book *Media Regulation*) looking at the role of the UK media regulator Ofcom as an institution in the

⁴⁵ Vesnic-Alujevic, *How My Research Has Been Useful, or Could Be Useful, for which Stakeholders in the Field?*.

⁴⁶ M. Dufrasne, G. Patriarche, *The Significance of Our Research on Citizen Participation for Social Practice*, 2012.

⁴⁷ (Orlikowski - Yates, 1998). **completare**

⁴⁸ Dufrasne, Patriarche, *The Significance of Our Research on Citizen Participation for Social Practice*.

⁴⁹ M. Radojković, *Significance of My Research to Social Practice*, 2012.

⁵⁰ N. Carpentier, *The Significance of Participatory Research for Social Practice*, 2012.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Lunt, Livingstone, *Media Regulation: Governance and the Interests of Citizens and Consumers*.

public sphere and Beybin Kejanlioglu⁵⁴ develops an interactive research project with alternative media in Turkey.

Nico Carpentier⁵⁵ focuses on civil society (with some reference to their relations with government) and argues that impact on user communities is most likely to result if there is a direct interaction between academics and non-academic stakeholders. In his individual report, he reviews examples of previous studies that have developed interactions between researchers and user communities as a model of research with social significance. For example, he discusses the Civil Media Unconferences, organised by the Austrian Radiofabrik⁵⁶:

These Unconferences were not only locations where academics and community media activists and producers could meet, but these Unconferences were also organised by a group of people from diverse backgrounds. In the case of the 2011 Civil Media Unconference, six content streams were included in the programme, four of which (on Public Value and Community Media; Feminist Media Production in Europe; Cross Media Publishing ; and Alternative Funding Methods/Crowdfunding) were organised by community media activists/producers, while two others were organised by academics⁵⁷.

Nico Carpentier⁵⁸ also discusses the example of the 2011 CMFE conference in Cyprus⁵⁹, where a dialogue developed between members of the Community Media Forum Europe⁶⁰ and academics, regulators, representatives of the council of Europe and the UNDP. Out of these dialogic contexts interactive research developed in which Nico Carpentier worked with the Cyprus Community Media Centre (CCMC). This collaboration led to joint academic-practitioner publications and a developing role for Nico Carpentier as a policy advisor to the development community media legislation in Cyprus. Nico Carpentier⁶¹ argues for a dialogic approach to action research that combines academic research, consultation and meetings with stakeholders that Dickens and Watkins⁶² characterise as “cycles of planning, acting, reflecting or evaluating, and then taking further action”.

Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone⁶³ in their research on the UK media regulator Ofcom examine the role of the regulator as an institution that engages a variety of stakeholders in issues of media policy and regulation at a number of levels. They examine the variety of ways in which the public are engaged in, or configured through, regulatory practice. For example, as consumers, people are engaged through annual consumer surveys, through the analysis of consumer complaints and through the Consumer Panel set up to represent consumer issues within the regulator. Each of these provide different contexts of engagement with their own logics and provide multiple perspectives on consumer concerns. People are also engaged as citizens by the regulator through its work on public service broadcasting, through the possibility of engaging in consultation and by

⁵⁴ B.D. Kejanlioglu, *An Individual Report on “The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice”*, 2012.

⁵⁵ Carpentier, *The Significance of Participatory Research for Social Practice*.

⁵⁶ <http://www.radiofabrik.at/>.

⁵⁷ Carpentier, *The Significance of Participatory Research for Social Practice*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ <http://www.cmfe.eu/conference2011>.

⁶⁰ <http://www.cmfe.eu/>.

⁶¹ Carpentier, *The Significance of Participatory Research for Social Practice*.

⁶² L. Dickens, K. Watkins, “Action Research: Rethinking Lewin”, *Management Learning*, 30 (1999), 2: 127-140.

⁶³ Lunt, Livingstone, *Media Regulation: Governance and the Interests of Citizens and Consumers*.

giving their opinions on matters related to media. Civil society bodies and the industry are also stakeholders engaged in consultation as well as being regulated and providing information to the regulator. Although there is no hard and fast distinction, the voices of citizens are represented in different ways to the concerns of consumers.

These modes of engagement with consumers and citizens are manifold in form and provide a complex set of interconnections between audiences and publics and a variety of stakeholders from the industry. In *Media Regulation*, Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone⁶⁴ argue that through this range of activities the regulator plays a role as an institution in the public sphere that can be evaluated according to Habermas' normative criteria for public institutions that combine legitimacy and effectiveness by articulating the public interest, balancing constraints, combining legitimacy and effectiveness, and ensuring reflexivity regarding the consequences of regulation. The complexity of the practical connections that are maintained and sustained by the regulator suggest that there is no unitary institutional logic of this organisation and that, while it is a principled, statutory regulator, in practice it is connected in networks with a wide range of bodies. This research raises the question of the role of public institutions in enabling both a variety of forms of deliberation and linking these to different bodies and institutions at different levels of abstract. Furthermore, the study raises questions about the normative legitimation of this, relatively independent arm of the state – indicating a form of governance that although apparently located within a single institution nevertheless operates across a dispersed range of connections which include publics, firms, government and civil society bodies. These arrangements seriously challenge normative theories of the media, indeed, theories of power grounded in the governmentality interpretation of Foucault's work urge us to move away from the normative traditions of critical theory and to embrace a theory of power that seems more suited to late capitalism focused on the tactics and arts of government.

There are two broad implications of these ideas: that normative theories need revision and that there is a major task ahead of researchers in media and communications to conduct empirical studies of the mediatization of politics⁶⁵. This work also illustrates an approach to producing academic work with social value since it addresses a question of social significance from an academic perspective. The research was conducted through an engagement with various stakeholders including the media regulator, civil society bodies and members of the public. In other words, in parallel with the analysis of the changing role of institutions, sits recognition of research in the field of media and communications to develop in interaction with its user communities.

A third example of research by COST TATS Action researchers developing an interaction with a user community focused on the role of alternative media in civic participation in Turkey. Her individual report discussed a study with bianet.org (an Independent Communication Network) including interviews with the producers of bianet news and focus groups with users which are interpreted as demonstrating three distinct forms of online interactivity:

First, there are specific publics oriented towards specific policies and changes, their different styles of protest and their non-hierarchical media participation. Second, there is the level of inter-public relations or networks of different publics which sometimes act as temporary

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Couldry, *Why Voice Matters: Culture and Politics after Neoliberalism*; Hepp, *Cultures of Mediatization*; Halvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society*.

elisions surrounding issues as, for example, situations when women activists with different orientations come together to protest against the Civil Code, or more enduring examples such as a news network. Third, there is public participation in political decision-making processes⁶⁶.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The broad background to the work of academics in media and communications concerned with issues of public voice and mediated participation includes a sensitivity to the ways that media and communications technologies are part of broader social, cultural, political and economic changes on a global scale with a variety of implications for national and local social order. Researchers aim to provide critical commentary and empirical evidence on the changing opportunities for the public to have a say in decisions that affect their lives and to engage in civil society and political activities. Much of our understanding of how media are implicated in social and political processes is derived from mass media in nation states with, in the European context, a focus on public media. These arrangements, in place for over 50 years in the post second world war era, are all in transition, changing the established balance between the state and commerce, providing new opportunities but also challenges to the articulation of citizen interests and to our understanding of the roles of media in the broader political process.

At such times of transformation, academics have a responsibility to reflect and to question the implications of changes; in our case, as media and communications researchers interested in media and democracy, the task is to examine the implications for the possibilities for public voice arising from the remediation of participation and deliberation in the digital media landscape. The research reported here uses a variety of approaches to engagement with stakeholders and user communities. There is a variety of work being done by members of WG2 and its Task Force on Public Voice and Mediated Participation that have implications for these concerns; research provides both relevant evidence about changing uses of media and reflections on the broader implications of these data for media policy, for industry, for civil society and for the public. This article has identified a range of different approaches that combine, in different ways, the development of theory, engagement with public debate, empirical research with a social purpose, consultation and policy advice, action research and interaction research. Evidently, academics in the field of media and communication have begun the process of researching, analyzing and disseminating their ideas about how the convergent media environment affects the links between civil society, audiences and politics.

INDIVIDUAL TATS COST ACTION REPORTS

G. Aleknonis, *How My Research Has Been Useful, or Could Be Useful, for which Stakeholders in the Field? Some Reflections*, 2012.

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⁶⁶ Kejanlioglu, *An Individual Report on "The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice"*.

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- M. Villi, *Mobile Media and User-Distributed Content in Media Management*, 2012.

SUMMARY

There is a long tradition of academic research addressing the role of media in democracy both in terms of formal political processes and broader political culture. Academic researchers have been concerned both to study the different ways in which the media are implicated in the political and to develop normative criteria by which the political role of the media can be evaluated. Recent developments in media and communications technology have combined with changes in democracy as it spreads to different social and cultural contexts across the world and to regional and global governance to raise new challenges concerning the role of media in democracy. At a time of transformation, perhaps, academics have a responsibility to bring theory and evidence into public debate and understanding. In this article I first outline some key features of the relation between media and democracy, focusing on how digital media are challenging concepts of political engagement. This is followed by a discussion of the different potential contributions made by communications and media researchers in this area using examples from reports of work conducted by members of the COST Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies (TATS). These contributions demonstrate the contribution of research to framing and interpreting social processes, providing evidence for particular policy concerns or initiatives and of academics developing ways of combining their academic interests with a more interactive or dialogic engagement with a variety of stakeholders.