Nick Couldry

Media and the problem of voice

Book section

http://eprints.lse.ac.uk

MEDIA AND THE PROBLEM OF VOICE
NICK COULDRY

Introduction

If contemporary societies and the contemporary world are profoundly mediated, then the principal questions for media research must be guided by reference-points <u>outside</u> media themselves. Media research must, paradoxically, become de-centered (Couldry 2006), so that it can ask more pertinent questions about what media do in wider social space. In a previous essay,[1] I proposed knowledge, agency and ethics – media's contribution to sustaining, or undermining, each of them – as specific reference-points for media research. But if media are, as I argued there, best understood "less . . . as a readily demarcated *site* of analysis . . . and more as a force field within a complex space of social practice",[2] then we need also to reflect on the large-scale pressures affecting that force field.

One such pressure is the growing problem – even crisis – of voice affecting many aspects of contemporary life. In this chapter, I want to sketch an outline of that crisis, before suggesting, in conclusion, how that crisis might affect where, specifically, we choose to stand in studying the dynamics of today's media and communications field. At that point, the necessity of a decentered approach to researching media should become even clearer: for media institutions are no less implicated in this crisis of voice than political or economic institutions.

The thought-process behind this chapter began when in May 2006 Sonia Livingstone, Tim Markham and I completed our book on nearly three years of intensive research into how and how far people's media consumption contributes to their sense of 'public connection', that is, their orientation to a world of public issues requiring public resolution (Couldry Livingstone and Markham 2007). Satisfyingly, perhaps, our research confirmed that most people in the UK do have "public connection", and this connection is mediated, although we realise it is always difficult to reach those who are intensely disconnected through research techniques that, inevitably, intrude upon their disconnection. Yet many of the diarists most engaged with media in our study doubted, it seemed, the <u>point</u> of being an engaged news-consuming citizen if their engagement was never recognized by the state in the course of the political process. As one diarist, a 47-year old senior health protection nurse from

England's rural Midlands, put it, "It's all right having a duty and following things but is there a point if there's nothing at the end of it?"

We suddenly saw that the real issue about the undoubted long-term decline in engagement in formal electoral politics in the UK and elsewhere – anxiously debated by leading political scientists (Pharr and Putnam 2000, Putnam 2002) – was not so much a "motivation crisis" (Habermas 1988, 78) on the part of citizens, although trust in politicians is undoubtedly low – as "a recognition crisis, a gap between what citizens do, or would like to do, and the state's recognition of what they do" (Couldry Livingstone and Markham 2007, 189). That recognition crisis can also be formulated as a crisis of voice.

Political institutions are formally required to offer voice (the chance for populations to have a say in decisions that affect them), and embody voice, at some level, if as 'representative' institutions they are to have any democratic legitimacy.[] But delivering voice requires more than the state having a formal mechanism where elected representatives 'speak for' large populations in decision-making, since that representative mechanism must itself have legitimacy. The legitimacy of a representative mechanism depends at least on whether it achieves some adequation between two levels of discourse: the state's decision-making and the everyday processes whereby those affected by decisions have voice, that is, express their opinions and give an account of themselves and the basis for their opinions. Otherwise political institutions will not be seen to deliver or embody voice. This, I suggest, is increasingly the situation in many advanced democracies today, resulting in a crisis of voice, where states remain compelled to offer voice, but are increasingly unable to deliver it in any meaningful form.

This deficit – the offer or invocation of voice by powerful institutions, and its simultaneous withdrawal – can be seen not just in the political field, but in the economic and cultural fields also (as I explain shortly). It may seem reckless to attempt an argument that will span the hugely complex transformations in contemporary politics, economics and culture, but the benefit is that we see more clearly how across a number of domains one underlying value is being systematically both invoked and denied – the value of voice - generating a long-term and large-scale crisis of voice in which media institutions cannot but be implicated. In a short chapter, this is not an argument I can develop conclusively, of course; my aim, simply, is to suggest how a sense of that impending crisis of voice should affect our priorities for media research in the next decade.

Voice in a relocated politics?

I will return later to the specific crisis of voice in some neoliberal democracies, but it is only fair first to recognize that such local difficulties occur within the frame of a broader crisis about where, and how, democratic politics can now be constituted.

For some time Ulrich Beck has argued that politics must be reinvented, not least because of globalization:

> What happens to territorially bounded politics in world society? How do collective binding decisions become possible under post-national conditions? Will politics wither away? Or will it undergo a transformation? (2000, 90)

Saskia Sassen more recently has argued, drawing on a huge amount of empirical evidence, that we can see the scale of politics being redefined both within and beyond the nation (Sassen 2006). Putting to one side Beck's vision of a "cosmopolitan project" (Beck 2000), let's focus on the more immediate practical and normative implications of this transformation. Acknowledging politics beyond the ambit of the hierarchical spaces of nation-states changes the terms on which politics can be seen to be done. In part, this is a matter of greater reflexivity within the practice of politics, a new "politics of politics" (Beck 1997, 99). But changing the possible scales of political action cuts across the very power-relations on which the state, as "container" of social action and political authority, is based. This has major implications for the 'representative' status of politics, and political institutions' capacity to deliver voice effectively. So Beck's "methodological cosmopolitanism" (2000) goes hand in hand with a "meta-transformation" in contemporary politics, a shift in its "foundations and basic concepts of power and domination, legitimacy and virtue" (Beck 2005, xii).

This shift becomes much more than theoretical when focused by the practical questions of 'representation'. By 'representation' here I mean both representation in the formal political sense - representation by delegation in particular processes of decision-making – and representation in the broader sense of symbolization, the two aspects being linked. For if, as I argued, political institutions can only deliver voice if there is some adequation between what, for short-hand, I will call the decision-making process and everyday voice, then the achievement of voice must involve more than the mere existence of formal mechanisms of delegation. It matters also how those affected by decisions (who are to be formally represented) are recognized in the narratives

told by or in relation to the state, including by media. Here major new problems are arising. Intensified economic migration, for example across and within the borders of Europe or across the US-Mexican border, raises questions of representation (in both senses) that cannot be resolved within the established logics of national politics. As Nancy Fraser has argued, contemporary transnational politics raises second-order questions of justice about "the relations of representation" that "tell[] us who is included in, and who excluded from, the circle of those entitled to a just distribution and reciprocal recognition" in particular political spaces (Fraser 2005, 75). The problem is that existing polities – and our nation-centred concept of the public sphere – are just not ready to answer such questions.

As a result, a new "politics of representation . . . must . . . aim to democratize the process of frame-setting" (2005, 80). Frame-setting, as Fraser puts it, means the process of determining who is represented as within, or beyond, the boundaries of citizen membership for political purposes: by definition, therefore, it involves processes of representation-as-symbolisation, that is, discourses about who is 'fit' to be given formal representation-by-delegation. Correcting current injustices of representation means recognizing the voices of those excluded by political systems and – implicitly, although it is not Fraser's concern to develop this – excluded by media systems which, of course, intensively represent (symbolize) the boundaries of political representation (formal delegation); it also means reflecting on whether the level of participation embodied by representative mechanisms is adequate to deliver voice, or whether it needs to be expanded. There is a gap here in the institutional frameworks of politics. We can either see this as a moment of huge potential when, as Etienne Balibar argues developing Beck, "a politics of politics [should] aim[] at creating, recreating, and conserving the set of conditions within which politics as a collective participation   in public affairs [that is, in both senses of representation, NC] is possible, or at least is not made absolutely impossible" (Balibar 2004, 114). Or, picking up on the pessimism at the end of Balibar's words, we can see a profound practical crisis where voice – democratically adequate representation – is both offered <u>and fails to be delivered</u> in a transnational politics whose form, as yet, is hardly defined, let alone institutionally embodied.

The Specific Crisis of Neoliberal Democracies

If the first aspect of the crisis of voice is ambiguous in its implications – serious representational deficit or useful stimulus to rethink the scale and aims

of politics? – the second aspect is more unambiguously negative, once we pierce the rhetoric of freedom that disguises it. This is the erosion of effective democracy within states that have adopted the neoliberal policy consensus.

Neoliberal doctrine – the discourse that prioritises market functioning above all other values within political, social and economic organization - has over the past 20 years become embodied in a new form of national politics that Colin Leys calls "market-driven politics" (2001). Leys' rich account of its emergence identifies three factors which drastically reduced the opportunities for challenge to the consequences of neoliberal doctrine.

First, various interlocking factors have drastically reduced the influence of national governments over national economies, leading to an 'internationalised state' (2001: 13): the liberalisation of capital flows; the liberalisation of ownership of national financial sectors, and the huge growth in capital markets, leading to massively increased trading on global financial markets and (just as important) the facilitation and huge growth in foreign direct investment through increased mobility of capital and faster communications. The national state is, in most situations, now considerably weaker in bargaining power and financial muscle than most transnational corporations, and in all situations massively weaker than global capital and foreign exchange markets. National governments now have diminishing influence over economic policy in their own territories and face increasing pressures to adopt towards policies specifically favourable to markets. Policies that markets don't like attract a "political premium" in the bond markets, with immediate and drastic consequences for national governments' costs of borrowing (Leys 2001, 22-23). These various influences are barely negotiable.

Second, there are the factors which have made social relations in countries such as Britain more "adapted" to these external market forces: the British state's divestment during the 1980s and 1990s of its assets and its dispersal into smaller departments and a mass of state agencies; the "dedemocratisation" of political parties and local government; and what Leys, perhaps more contentiously, sees as the embedding of market ideology in everyday life. Here Leys' analysis links closely with Rose's (1996) analysis of the "degovernmentalisation" of the state through the expansion, among other things, of audit culture. The result, Leys argues, is a profound shift in the texture and purpose of politics: "politics are no longer about managing the economy to satisfy the demands of voters, they are increasingly about getting voters to endorse policies that meet the demands of capital" (2001, 68). Even if citizens wanted to challenge the underlying priority given to market principles by

governments, this would be difficult because of the biases towards market-friendly policies now built into the national political setting.

The result of market-driven politics is that national democratic systems become less able, even in principle, to <u>deliver</u> voice – for example, in reflecting popular unease over policies that affect the provision of public services or the allocation of public resources, or the conditions experienced by citizens at, or in the pursuit of, work – even as, for other reasons, governments must continue to <u>offer</u> voice, as condition of their basic legitimacy, but also (for UK's New Labour) in fulfillment of their populist rhetoric and historical legacy.

This localized crisis of voice applies not just to the "external" relations between government and citizens, but affects the internal processes of government itself. The adoption of 'audit' as the primary tool of policy monitoring and social/economic management has its own anti-democratic consequences. Here is the leading analyst of audit culture, Michael Power:

> The audit process requires trust in experts and is not a basis for rational pubic deliberation. It is a dead end in the claim of accountability . . . more accounting and auditing does not necessarily mean more and better accountability . . . and [yet] <u>it expresses the promise of accountability</u> . . . <u>but this promise is at best ambiguous</u>: the fact of being audited deters public curiosity and inquiry . . . Audit is in this respect a substitute for democracy rather than its aid. (Power 1997, 127, added emphasis)

The disappearance, in Britain certainly, of substantive political debate over the validity of market-driven policies intersects with governments' increasing implication in an accelerating news-cycle, undermining the possibility of policy deliberation <u>even within</u> government itself. Here are the reflections of a senior civil servant who served under the Blair and preceding administrations in Britain:

> We no longer had . . . the time or the capability to be thorough enough to explain to ourselves, to Parliament and the public just what we were attempting, and therefore to make reasonably sure what was practical and would work. (Foster 2005, 1-2)

If, as Leys and many others have argued, the same is true within public services and in public services' dealings with their users, then there is a crisis of voice at many levels in neoliberal democracies, justify perhaps Henry Giroux's diagnosis: "underneath neoliberalism's corporate ethic and market-based fundamentalism, not only is the idea of democracy disappearing but the spaces in which democracy is produced and nurtured are being eliminated" (2006, 25).

However, far from being contained within the political system, this crisis of voice affects also the labour markets in which each of us is, unavoidably, a player – so much so that this has recently been recognized within neoliberalism's master discipline, economics.

The cracks within classical economics

Here I must be even more schematic. We have all heard countless times the argument that jobs must be lost, or basic workplace securities curtailed, because the economic "facts of life" demand it. There is, in principle, no place for "voice" – negotiation or deliberation about policies' consequences for the lives of producers - within market systems. There is therefore no direct <u>contradiction</u>, or crisis, over voice in contemporary economies, just a permanent deficit. But what is interesting is how this deficit is increasingly seen by critical voices in economics as itself signaling a crisis in their discipline. I have space for only two examples.

One comes from mainstream economics and the work of Robert Lane (2001). Lane's is not an argument against neoliberalism: overall he praises the success of markets in generating wealth, and in increasing prospects of happiness. But Lane also notes that richer societies may have higher levels of depression than poorer societies. The key factor ignored in economics for Lane is "companionship" (2001, 77). Economics is misguided because it looks to <u>markets</u> for the values relevant to individuals, when markets are just general mechanisms for achieving "species benefits", not individual benefits (2001, 95). Work in particular, Lane argues, is the site of profound misunderstanding in economic thought:

> There is a deep reason for the undervaluation of the psychic income and enjoyment of work: . . . The underlying assumption is that people work in order to earn in order to consume; work is a disutility for which income and consumption are the compensating utilities. But <u>even in a market economy</u>, this is often, perhaps usually, not true . . . rather work and work mastery are the sources of very great pleasure. (2001: 162, added emphasis).

If Lane, working within a discipline profoundly influenced by utilitarianism, refers to the "pleasure" of work, we can just easily talk here of voice, the failure of economics to recognize people's work-lives as a key component in their possibilities for voice.

Considerably more radical is the work of the philosopher and development economist Amartya Sen. Sen insists that mainstream economics has floundered from the moment it separated itself from ethics (Sen 1987). For all its claims to social relevance, Sen argues, contemporary economics must fail to satisfy the demands of ethics, for ethics "cannot stop the evaluation [of economic activity] short at some arbitrary point like satisfying 'efficiency'. The assessment has to be more fully ethical, and take a broader view of the good" (1987, 4, added emphasis). Sen goes from there to attack a number of fundamental targets.

First, rational choice theory (RCT) is attacked for offering only "one very narrow interpretational story" of how human beings think (2002, 28) – that is, through the maximisation of their own welfare, so ignoring, for example, the possibility of commitment to the welfare of others, and more generally people's reflective "values about values" (2002, 6). Second, Sen attacks fundamentalists of market "freedom" such as Milton Friedman because market liberalism is interested only in the process aspects of freedom, so ignoring its opportunity aspects, that is, "the actual ability of [that] person to achieve those things that she has reason to value" (2002, 10, added emphasis).

Sen's project reopens the concepts of rationality and freedom – concepts so dear to neoliberal ideology - to renewed debate about value, and the ends of economic and market activity. Sen argues that this merely restores economics' interface with the ethical world in which real subjects live. In effect Sen is, as he remarks of his mentor Kenneth Arrow, reinserting voice into economics: "the recognition of the 'voice' of members of the society in the formulation of social choice and the role that this voice gets in influencing social decisions" (2002: 591). One political ambition of Sen's work is very clear: to challenge RCT's dominance in economics and neoliberal politics by showing how it offers an impoverished economics and ethics, and therefore ensures an impoverished politics. This crisis around 'voice' in classical economics offers a glimmer of hope, perhaps, that the current political hegemony of neoliberal doctrine may one day be challenged.

Media and the Crisis of Voice

Even if you accept my argument that a common structure – a crisis of voice – links the fields of democratic theory, neoliberal politics, and contemporary economics, what, you might ask, has this to do with media research? The answer is that media institutions and media processes are implicated in this multiple crisis of voice – and unavoidably so.

To return to my starting-point, media now have, as one of their primary roles, the representation of politics and the economy, but processes of mediation are also embedded within each of those domains and are crucial to economic and political power. It would be strange indeed if media did not, at least, reflect today's crisis of voice. But the link goes deeper, because media have, for much of their history and in most places, been channels <u>for voice</u>, indeed for extending the range of voices that can be heard, even as media institutions themselves have relied on a historically entrenched concentration of the symbolic resources through which voices can be heard.[3]

Media institutions have then, in a sense, been involved for a long time in a crisis of voice of their own, which continues today. One way of reading the explosion of "reality" programming over the past decade is as a response, under pressure of intensified competition between media outlets, to the need to sustain legitimacy with audiences; another is as a genre-based response to the recent diffusion of the technical resources by which transmission-quality material can be produced; another is that reality TV is simply very cheap. What's most interesting about this ambiguous phenomenon is that it depends on an offer of voice – the claim to present "ordinary reality", that is audiences' "authentic" reality – whose artifice is constantly challenged, and then covered over again. Whether we can see a wider crisis of voice in contemporary popular culture – for example, in the growth of celebrity culture – is a much larger question that I cannot deal with here, but at the very least medias' offer of voice is one that must be problematised in analyzing contemporary media.

But the issue goes deeper still. The need to problematise claims to represent or express voice within contemporary media is being intensified by a long-term technological shift under way which <u>promises</u> (but the promise's status is highly uncertain) to destabilize the relation between centralized content producers ('the media') and dispersed audiences, around which the whole history of media to date has been based. Even UK government advisers need to take as a premise that "it is now as easy to create and distribute information online as it is to consume it" (Mayo and Steinberg 2007, 9). But the implications of this apparently simple fact - not for government, with whom those authors are concerned, but for media institutions - are unknown at this point in the long-term "crisis" of voice in which media <u>institutions</u> – not systems of media transmission – are implicated.

I put "crisis" in scare quotes this last time, because we might argue there is no problem here, quite the opposite. Indeed, if there is a media-specific value that orientates my own research on media, it is the hope that the current huge

concentrations of symbolic power in media institutions will irrevocably, over time, be dispersed. It is however entirely uncertain whether habits of Internet use, as they develop and then sediment into new patterns of everyday practice, will produce anything like that outcome.

Even if we do not recognize a coming "crisis" of voice in media – since a democratization of media would surely contribute something <u>positive</u> to correcting the real crises of voice in politics and the economy – we should at least acknowledge that the question of voice is a key problematic for orienting our research into how media's role within the social world will change in the coming decade. This means that excluding from view media-making outside mainstream media institutions is no longer just wrong – as it was when I and many others[4] protested on the importance of research into alternative, radical or citizens' media – but positively <u>arcane</u>.

More than that, when unavoidably we look at non-mainstream media alongside mainstream media productions, part of what we will look for is whether, in either case, they offer, or not, a significant extension of voice. This in turn will not be decideable without thinking about how those media productions link with the deeper and genuine crises of voice within contemporary polities and economies discussed earlier. For, if they do not, we may need to turn our research energies elsewhere.

Notes

[1] Couldry (2006, chapter 2).
[2] Couldry (2006, 31).
[3] Couldry (2000, 1-8).
[4] Couldry (2002), but see for much greater detail Downing (2001), Rodriguez (2001), Atton (2002)**,** Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2007).

Works cited

Atton, Chris. 2002. Alternative Media. London: Sage.

Bailey, Olga, Cammaerts Bart, Carpentier, Nico (2007) Understanding Alternative Media. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Balibar, Etienne. 2004. We the People of Europe? Princeton : Princeton University Press.

Beck, Ulrich. 1997. The Reinvention of Politics. Cambridge: Polity.

Beck, Ulrich. 2000. The Cosmopolitan Perspective: Sociology of the Second Age of Modernity? British Journal of Sociology 51(1): 79-105.

Beck, Ulrich. 2005. Power in the Global Age. Cambridge: Polity.

Couldry, Nick 2000. The Place of Media Power. London: Routledge.

Couldry, Nick 2002. Mediation and alternative media, or relocating the centre of media and communication studies. Media International Australia 103: 24-31.

Couldry, Nick 2006. Listening Beyond the Echoes: Media, Ethics and Agency in an Uncertain World. Boulder: Paradigm.

Couldry, Nick, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham. 2007. Media consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention. Basingstke: Palgrave.

Downing, John. 2001. Radical Media 2nd edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Foster, Christopher. 2005. British Government in Crisis. Oxford: Hart Publishing.

Fraser, Nancy. 2005. Reframing Global Justice. New Left Review (ns) 36:69-90.

Giroux, Henry. 2006. Stormy Weather: Katrina and the Politics of disposability. Boulder: Paradigm.

Habermas, Jurgen. 1988. Legitimation Crisis. Cambridge: Polity.

Lane, Robert. 2000. The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Leys, Colin. 2001. Market-Driven Politics. London: Verso.

Mayo, Ed and Steinberg, Tom. 2007. The Power of Information. http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/publications/reports/power_information/power_information.pdf (accessed 22 June 2007).

Pharr, Susan and Robert Putnam, eds. (2000). Disaffected Democracies. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Power, Michael. 1997. The Audit Society. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Putnam, Robert. 2002. Democracies in Flux. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rodriguez, Clemencia. 2001. Fissures in the Mediascape. Creskill: Hampton Press.

Rose, Nikolas. 1996. Governing "advanced" liberal democracies. In Foucault and Poltical Reason. Edited by Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose. London: UCL Press.

Sassen, Saskia. 2006. Territory, Authority, Rights. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Sen, Amartya. 1987. On Ethics and Economics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, Amartya. 2002. Rationality and freedom. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.