

Robert Hackett's Reformist Radicalism and the Democratic Deficit in UK and US media

Dawn Paley, January 2010

In his 2005 essay Is there a democratic deficit in US and UK journalism, professor Robert Hackett proposes three lenses through which democracy can be viewed, and explains what critique each may advance regarding the media's role in aiding or abetting the democratic process. According to Hackett, these are:

Market liberal/Elitist democracy: The type of democracy that has attained political and cultural hegemony. Elitist democrats argue for small government and unfettered market activity, with a caveat that the state maintains a large police and army in order to protect private property and uphold an unequal social order. The role of the media is to entertain the public without encouraging meaningful political participation, and to facilitate inter-elite communications. The media, according to this view of democracy, may have a democratic deficit because of a perceived (though not convincingly proven) "left liberal bias," and due to government funding (which may raise issues that threaten the role of the business/military elites).

'Public Sphere' democracy: The type of democracy where private property and capitalism remain fundamental tenets of the political system, but where there is room for some level of public participation in the system. Public participation can range from informed participation in policy making to a mere appearance of public participation to legitimate elite governance. This is a reformist conceptualization of democracy, where what is needed to "fix" what is broken are adjustments to the system and some level of increased public participation. The media, according to this view of democracy have a role to play in facilitating a Habermasian "public sphere," and a democratic deficit may exist where the media fails to do so.

Radical democracy: The type of democracy that involves the maximum level of public participation in all kinds of political and economic decision-making. May be considered a kind of deep democracy, which implies that participants must be literate in social policy issues. Includes an emphasis on equality in society, which denotes some state or local control over the economy. The media, according to this view of democracy, should play a role in horizontal communications as well as explaining power and structural issues. It is clear the mass media in the U.K. and the U.S. have largely failed to uphold this role, thus the radical democrat's more comprehensive critique of media ownership and media concentration.

Of particular interest for the purpose of this paper is Hackett's rather limited definition of "radical democracy," which in turn leads him to a weakened critique of the democratic deficit in the media, and a prevents him from articulating radical solutions to the democratic deficit.

Hackett notes that elitist democracy has maintained a hegemonic position since the 1908s, but in his description of radical democracy, he fails to articulate the massive structural changes necessary in the practice of any radical democracy movement.

Any description of “radical” democracy must include, for example, a transition away from a globalized capitalist economic system based on the sanctity of free markets and private property, a halt to the dominant system of resource extraction and waste production, and a disarticulation of nation states, corporations, and their various repressive forces.

Had Hackett meaningfully included demands for such structural changes in his analysis of radical democracy, it is doubtful that he would begin his definition of radical democracy by stating “radical democrats seek not just to reinvigorate the existing system of representative democracy, but to move beyond it towards direct *citizen* participation in decision making in the neighborhood, workplace and family and gender relations – the lifeworld” (Emphasis mine, 91).

The notion that radicals can somehow change the root structure of capitalist democracy through participation ignores the reality of struggles against capitalism, colonization and empire in North America. This was brought into sharp focus during massive protests against the invasion of Iraq by U.S. forces and the coalition of the willing, when the majority of politicians and the news media ignored the biggest anti-war mobilization in U.S. history.

In today’s democratic system, we are already allowed to participate, at least to some extent, by involving ourselves in various reformist groups or “progressive” political parties that interact with the political system. Radical democracy entails not just participation in decision-making, but an overhaul of the institutional systems of decision making.

Also, the suggestion that that participation be limited to citizens imposes upon radical struggles a nationalistic, reformist discourse that others non-citizens and those who choose not to recognize the jurisdiction of colonial-settler states. The rejection of the nation state is a key tenet in the struggle for a more just, equal society, and the most oppressed members of our society, including migrants and Indigenous peoples, are among those leading the struggle for radical change in North America today. To discount their participation, be it accidental or not, risks slipping into a liberal-reformist-elite-public-sphere analysis of the changes necessary in society.

When it comes to Hackett’s understanding of the role of radical democrats in reshaping the media to eliminate or reduce its democratic deficit, it is doubtful that given a stronger definition of the demands of radical democrats, he would argue “radical democrats are likely to be in the forefront of a reform coalition,” aimed at introducing regulatory and legislative initiatives (95).

In the same way that Hackett is unable to conceive of radical democracy as a structural reshaping of society and power relations, including the potential for confrontation, he suggests that radical democrats become the vanguard of what is essentially a ‘public-sphere’ liberal platform for reforming the media.

This ignores what may be the most powerful potential of the participation of radicals in addressing the democratic deficit of the media. If the work of radicals is in the fostering and maintenance of social movements aimed at building alternative economies and societies that don't depend on nation states or corporations for validation or legitimacy, it follows that the radicals, be they democrats, anarchists or otherwise, have a role to play in creating media structures that reflect the structure and demands of social movements.

Instead of so called "radical" left media groups like the U.S. based "Free Press" positioning themselves at the vanguard of a lobby organization for media reform (and arguably becoming co-opted into 'public sphere' democracy), radical media makers can be stronger and more powerful when they act independently to develop alternative journalistic structures and practices which are aimed at strengthening social movements and informing the public at large without being co-opted into reformist lobbying efforts.

Works Consulted

Hackett, Robert. "Is there a democratic deficit in US and UK journalism," in Stuart, Allan, ed., *Journalism: Critical Issues* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005, 85-97).