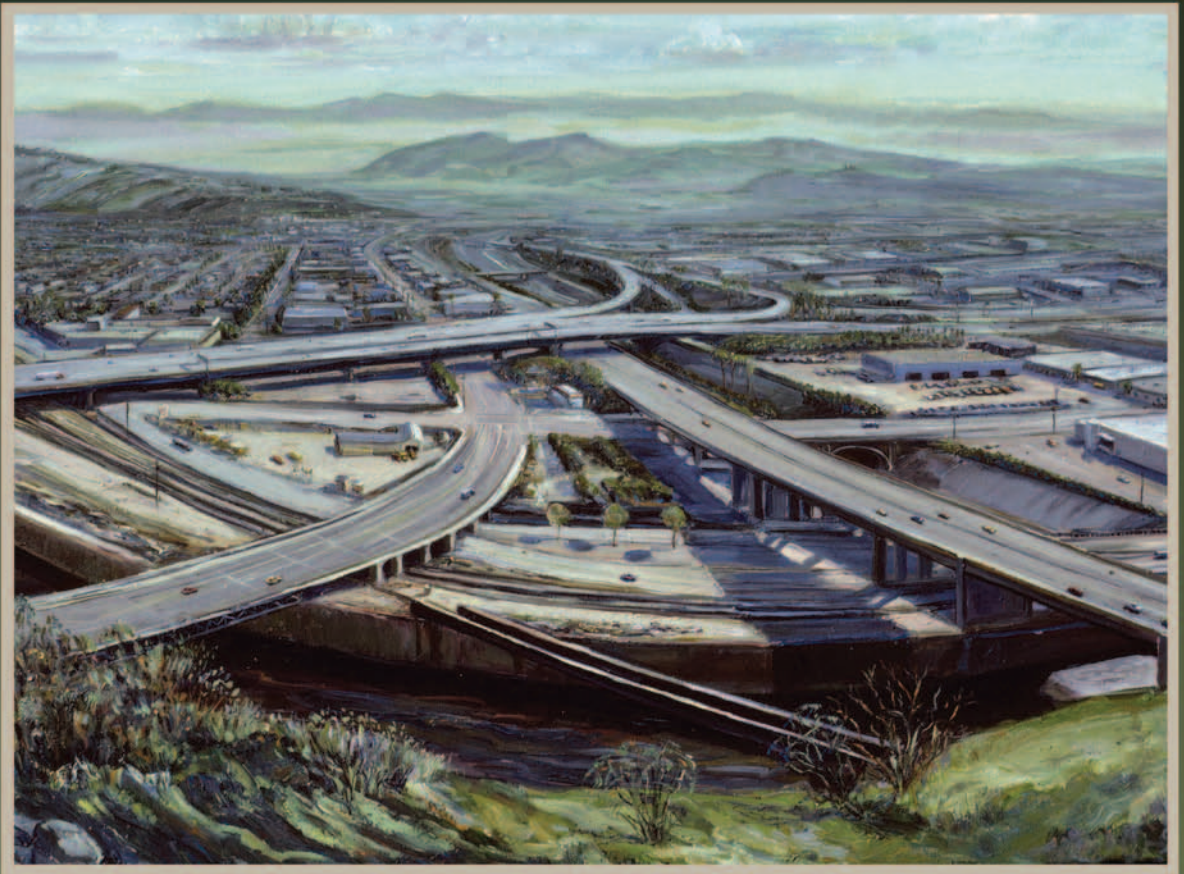


KETTERING REVIEW



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the quality of public life in the American democracy

Editor	Robert J. Kingston
Associate Editor	Noëlle McAfee
Art Director/Production	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
Assistant to the Editor	Sarah Dahm
Copy Editor	Lisa Boone-Berry
Formatting	Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
Illustrations	Carol Vollet

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Beyond Manipulation: Democracy and Media

by Noëlle McAfee

*“Can people use
media to help create
a more inclusive
public world?”*

Among intellectuals and political activists, there is a general sense that the media can be, in fact often are, tools for manipulation, in the sense that those in power are able to harness the media to manipulate public opinion and that only the sentimental and the naïve would think otherwise. This is a view one can find on both the right and the left, with the right decrying the liberal media and the left outraged by corporate media that is increasingly consolidated. In this paper I argue that this sensibility stems from an impoverished view of both democracy and media, namely by thinking of democratic governance as a form of manufacturing public will and by thinking of media as a monolithic entity that is largely used for such instrumental ends. I argue that democracy is a way of being in which all who are affected by common matters have a voice in shaping those matters and that a plurality of forms of media can be used to help give people voice and allow them to shape their world together.

Is democracy self-rule, rule by the people or rule by the rabble? Plato thought of it in the latter terms, as a degraded form of government brought about by licentious, desire-driven, and basically incontinent masses. The best form of government would be rule by the best: by experts who had the public good at heart. The problem with democracy, as Plato saw it, is fundamentally that most people don't know what their own good is. The masses of people are ruled by their passions, so they could hardly be rulers of themselves. Democracy is thus

practically a conceptual impossibility. Instead there arises rule by “exiled desires” and “pretentious fallacies and opinions,” which occupy “the vacant citadel of a young man’s mind.” Democratic man throws off any moderation,

Ideals of democracy couldn’t stand up to the complexity of life.

in favor of insolence, license, and extravagance. As Plato’s Socrates puts it, democratic man lives from day to day, indulging the pleasure of the moment. One day it’s wine, women and song, the next water to drink and a strict diet; one day it’s hard physical training, the next indolence and careless ease, and then a period of philosophic study. Often he takes to politics and keeps jumping to his feet and saying or doing whatever comes into his head. Sometimes all his ambitions and efforts are military, sometimes they are all directed to success in business. There’s no order or restraint in his life, and he reckons his way of living is pleasant, free and happy, and sticks to it through thick and thin.

But ephemeral desires lead to excess and whim rather than reason. This kind of climate breeds lawlessness and anarchy, creating fertile ground for a strong leader who often becomes a tyrant.

Political thinkers of the 20th century found much the same to be true. As Michael Schudson notes in *The Good Citizen*, by the 1920s “the theories of Sigmund Freud, behaviorists, crowd psychologists, and others who examined the irrationality of the human psyche offered scientific grounds to wonder

whether the ideal of democracy had ever made any sense in the first place.” The main culprit was desire.

Human beings are conflicted creatures driven by desire, Freud was now teaching; and they are social creatures, the sedimentary collecting points for the deposits of social forces, as the new social psychology instructed. They were anything but rational, autonomous individuals.

In early 20th century America, the dominant Progressive Era view was that the public was not in good shape to run its own affairs. As Walter Lippmann, the eminent journalist of the 20th century, put it in 1925, “The accepted theory of popular government ... rests upon the belief that there is a public which directs the course of events. I hold that this public is a mere phantom.”

Lippmann sincerely worried that leaving public matters to the public was ill advised. Despite the democratic credo that the public was the proper authority on matters of public concern, he saw ample evidence that, when consulted, people tended to act or vote out of self-interest, not out of any larger sense of commonweal. Moreover, most people were far



too busy tending to their own lives to be fully aware of public policy issues. Their time was limited and their attention short: “The public will arrive in the middle of the third act and will leave before the last curtain, having stayed

Activities became the province of professionally run organizations.

just long enough perhaps to decide who is the hero and who the villain.”

In an era that prided itself for rationality, technocracy, and electoral and governmental reform, thinkers of the early 20th century came up against a cold reality: citizens did not seem to understand very well complex political matters; they didn’t know what was politically for their own good. As Walter Lippmann put it, “The ideal of the omnicompetent, sovereign citizen is, in my opinion, ... a false ideal. It is unattainable. The pursuit of it is misleading. The failure to achieve it has produced the current disenchantment.” Like Plato before him, Lippmann worried that people were easily manipulated and could not fully grasp what was in their own interest. Besides, public issues were increasingly complex.

No one individual could possibly master all the details and intricacies of issues facing the body politic.

The 18th-century, romantic ideals of citizenship and democracy couldn’t stand up to the complexity of 20th-century life, or as Woodrow Wilson said, “If Jefferson were living in our day, he would see what we see: that the individual is caught in a great confused nexus of all sorts of complicated circumstances, and that to let him alone is to leave him helpless as against the obstacles with which he has to contend.”

Stymied by desire and complexity, the citizen of the 20th century could hardly be an agent of democracy. Good government Progressives of the first part of the 20th century sought for leadership not terribly unlike Plato’s guardians: experts schooled in the affairs of state; people not tempted by money and corruption; leaders who could sift through the complexities of issues and glean what policies were best; institutions and organizational structures that could take over the functions that a hapless citizenry seemed unable to carry out. Where before many nongovernmental activities, such as philanthropy, were carried out by volunteers, soon these activities became the province of professionally run organizations, effectively relieving citizens of any duty beyond staying informed enough to cast a modicum of an intelligent vote.

It is almost amusing to look back now, a century later, at what unraveled the ideal of democracy: psychoanalysis and technocracy, the



complexity of the psychic and the public worlds. Freud and Heidegger nailed it: Freud in discerning that all is not as it seems; Heidegger in seeing what is lost of the human in an age of technocracy. No one really disagreed with their diagnoses: not the pollsters, nor the government bureaucrats, not presidents or philanthropists. In the 20th century, just when universal suffrage was nearly complete, the very notion of democratic citizenship was quietly revoked. American democracies continued to mouth niceties about democracy, but in reality the ideals of citizenship and deep democracy were little more than jokes: our democracy morphed into good government, run by officials elected by people who couldn't fathom the issues.

Gone was any philosophical hope that a democratic citizenry might generate public will on matters of common concern and that such will could soundly guide the ship of state. If the public wills anything, it is because it has

Democracy morphed into good government.

been manipulated. Whether this public will, or public opinion, is manufactured for better or for worse is where political ideology comes into play. Liberals like Walter Lippmann would hope that good people would run government and help shape public opinion. A Marxist or a Gramscian would see the ways in which cultural hegemony is created, usually as a tool to uphold the status quo and the powers that be. A progressive social activist today might hope that hegemony can change hands, that social justice can be had by helping to raise, or really shape, public consciousness on the importance of this or that cause or issue. Today public opinion

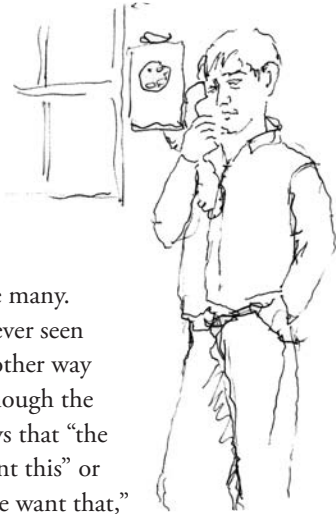
is seen as something that is manufactured by a select few and then sold to the many.

It's rarely ever seen to be the other way around, though the lie is always that "the people want this" or "the people want that," providing cover for politicians to do what they wanted to do in the first place.

Not everyone thought the answer to the problem of the befuddled citizen was good government, however. Lippmann's contemporary and friend, John Dewey, famously retorted that rather than focus on the machinery of government we should focus on helping the public find itself. Dewey agreed with Lippmann that the public often seemed apathetic and unwilling to tackle the problems that plagued it. But Dewey did not think that apathy was really the problem. He thought it was something closer to bewilderment.

What seems to be apathy, Dewey argued, is best understood as "testimony to the fact that the public is so bewildered that it cannot find itself. People feel and suffer consequences but don't know why they come about."

Dewey thought a public came into being when people came to recognize themselves as jointly affected by problems. For instance, people in Lake Charles who work at and live near a PVC plant come to see that the plant's dioxin emissions are harming their own families' and their neighbors' health, and that they



together must address the health problems themselves or force government to do so. At that moment they aren't just individual citizens (or noncitizens), or workers, or sick people. They are members of a public, who

Public opinion is seen as manufactured by a select few.

see other members of that public as similar to them because they share a common problem.

Dewey did not think better guardians would fix the problem. He focused on reconstituting the public. He defined the public simply as all “those indirectly and seriously affected for good or evil” by the “human collective action” of some particular group of people. Whenever any group's actions have consequences for a community as a whole, this community is a political *public*.

But it is not always easy for a public to “find itself” as a group of people jointly affected by the consequences of actions. Even in his own day, Dewey recognized that modern, technological difficulties often obscure the source and the extent of public problems. So perceiving indirect consequences—understanding the relationships that create the problems—is key to turning a public from inchoate to self-aware.

Here is what John Dewey proposed:

- To find itself, the public needs to be able to fully fathom the consequences of human actions and the origins of actions.
- The public needs to be able to know “what to make of” the relationships they come to understand. They need to know what they can do and what the implications of their own actions will be.

- People need to have more and better opportunities to find each other, in actual places where they can meet face to face. If the knowledge stays locked up inside themselves, it can't help feed the public as a public.

But for any of this to happen, Dewey realized, a far-flung people needed means of communication by which they could talk together. In his day, Dewey must have been thinking of radio. Today, the media universe, and its possibilities, has expanded exponentially.

This brings me to the second part of this story. It seems that hand-in-hand when talking about democracy—especially any larger than the 10,000-people threshold of Athens or even the 30,000-people limit of a New England town, which is rigorously differentiated from a city (because while towns can be run by town meeting, cities really cannot), we have to talk about the media. But now things get really complicated, with the two narratives of democracy—the cynical one of a Plato, Lippmann, and Schumpeter bumping up against the hopeful one of an Aristotle, Dewey, or today a Ben Barber, Jane Mansbridge, or Harry Boyte. In the former, media manipulate. In the latter, media are assumed to provide ways for people to communicate, to make their inner worlds part of a public and human world, to help shape and direct the public world. Of course, both pictures are right, all at the same time: there are media that purposely set out to manipulate; and there are regular people using media all over the place today in a more humane way.

And these two modes interfere with each other.

The culture industry that Horkheimer and Adorno first noted in the 1930s and 1940s is still at work today, structuring desire and truncating meaningfulness, promising escape from the drudgery of work while simultaneously

Media are assumed to provide ways for people to communicate.

upholding capitalism. So even when the consumer can use new media to become a producer of a wiki or a podcast or a blog, he or she has already been shaped by the culture industry. They never really have a fresh start. And the once-marginalized and powerless denizen of mass society can start a blog that the corporate media has to reckon with. Big media and little media don't operate on separate planes; they constantly interact; neither is immune from the other.

But within "big media" and "little media," or whatever term one wants to use, there are many, many kinds. Both on the right and on the left, there is a tendency to think of the media as a monolith, as if The Media is an entity with a monolithic agenda. The left of course thinks it is usually a tool of the right, and the right thinks it is a tool of the left. (And people in the media often point to this contradiction and say, see, if both sides disagree with us we must be really squarely in the middle.)

During the past decade, I've spent quite a bit of time with people who work in the media: mainly journalists, but also documentary filmmakers, producers, distributors, station managers, and educators. What I've found is that the media are hardly a monolith. The media, as the noun indicates, are a plurality. There are many arenas, including publicly

funded media; more conventional for-profit media; start-up new media; media harnessed by citizen groups bent on survival, not profit. There are cable access media; radio, print, broadcast, and Internet media. There are social networks, wikis, podcasts, blogs, vlogs, and low-powered unlicensed radio stations. There are journalists who abide by the conventions of disinterest and objectivity; journalists who think their work calls for civic engagement; and there are advocates who use media for social change. Even within an individual media entity, such as a newspaper, there are divisions that work in print and others that operate online. What we are talking about is not one thing but many.

So I propose that it is largely a mistake to talk about "the media," since there really is no such thing, at least as a thing with a single-minded purpose. The media comprise a large field. Generalizations can be made. We philosophers can generalize about, for example, what new avenues the media might lead us to; but we can do this only in a vague way. It is a mistake to point at the media in order to make any kind of blanket statement.

There are media that objectify women's bodies and create an impossible ideal of female





beauty. But there are also documentary filmmakers who use media to try to counter these tendencies. Blame shouldn't be laid at the feet of the media, it should be laid at the particular kind of corporate and cultural structures that use media in a way that creates these impossible ideals.

Realizing that the media are plural and not monolithic is a good first step in thinking productively about the role of media in a democracy, especially in the kind of ersatz democracy we have become. Dewey's vision didn't come true, at least not yet. Lippmann's vision did. Up until 10 years ago it's safe to say that media were largely a tool of a few to persuade the many, to manufacture consent, as Noam Chomsky aptly put it.

This was largely a technological happenstance: media were primarily one-way means of communication. Because the public technically owned the airwaves, a limited number of broadcast licenses were awarded and small low-powered radio stations were discouraged or outlawed. Anyone could own a printing press, but the economics of the newspaper business increasingly consolidated

print media. Newspapers, which had once been avowedly partisan, in the United States, through the economy of the penny press, became vehicles for advertising, not impassioned advocates. To back up their lack of advocacy, the field created ideals of disinterestedness, objectivity, and fairness. Journalists saw themselves as watchdogs and arms of the public, but not invested in public life. Newspapers drew lines between the business side of the organization and the editorial side, yet anyone on the outside could generally detect the political leanings of a given newspaper.

Through most of the 20th century, the media transmitted one-way, originating from owners of media and aiming at the reading, listening, or viewing public. People in the media generally referred to their consumers as their audience, not their public. Within the media, journalism differentiated itself from the entertainment industry by seeing itself as serving a political function: informing the public so that it could vote intelligently and hold institutions accountable. But still, even newspapers primarily saw their readers as *spectators* of a political process, not *participants* in it. Media became the actor and the public the audience. This in itself was inherently undemocratic, for the people were always subject to what the owners of media articulated. The people couldn't articulate itself for itself, not in public, not in any way that was audible beyond the occasional gathering or demonstration.

So for the most part through the 20th century, the media were mostly oblivious to Dewey's imperative that they could be tools to help the public form itself. Most of the media were in the entertainment business. Journalism was in the information business. No one was in the public-formation business, at least

not directly. Horkheimer and Adorno's claims remained eerily prescient that the culture industry, throughout the 20th century, shaped what people wanted, hence truncating their political lives and expectations.

Industry is interested in people merely as customers and employees, and has in fact reduced mankind as a whole and each of its elements to this all-embracing formula. According to the ruling aspect at the time, ideology emphasizes plan or chance, technology or life, civilization or nature. As employees, men are reminded of the rational organization and urged to fit in like sensible people. As customers, the freedom of choice, the charm of novelty is demonstrated to them on the screen or in the press by means of the human and personal anecdote. In either case they remain objects.

The less the culture industry has to promise, the less it can offer a meaningful explanation of life.

By late 20th century, many advocates on the left stopped complaining about the dehumanizing and depoliticizing aspects of mass media and started embracing it for their own purposes. In the mid-'80s, I worked for an organization called the Advocacy Institute, where part of our goal was to train progressive advocates on how to use the media for progressive ends. A year later, I was working for Public Citizen's Congress as a "community organizer," when really my job was to manufacture the illusion of public outrage over pesticides or the Price-Anderson Act or some other nefarious thing in order to win the good fight on Capitol Hill. During the first Persian Gulf War, I used my new skills in media work to help mount an antiwar movement in Austin, Texas. These ends were all good, but the means were all

ones with which I became increasingly uncomfortable. They were methods for trying to manipulate public opinion, not methods to cultivate public opinion.

What's the difference? Manufacturing public opinion starts with a solution that a

A person needs to think and choose in the company of others.

select group has decided upon, then tries to sell it to the larger public. Cultivating public opinion is a matter of helping to convene a public and then allowing that public to decide for itself what the problem is, how it affects them, what the ramifications are, what ought to be done, and how any goal ought to be effected. Cultivating public opinion puts real faith and power in the people. For many elite liberal types—like many of us—this can be very scary, for "the people" have historically made some really terrible decisions. Think of



ballot initiatives from California to Massachusetts that have limited property taxes to the point of destroying public education or those that have banned bilingual education or gay marriage. The offense in these kinds of “public will” formations is, I offer, that cultivating public opinion happens in deliberative and not knee-jerk settings. People need opportunities to think through issues together; to hear stories from people with different histories, cultures, and contexts; and to really weigh the costs and consequences as they work through the possible choices. This kind of deliberation calls for a kind of choice work informed by Freudian theory. It is in fact true that we are not autonomous, transparent, rational subjects free of desire. But this need not doom democracy and citizenship; this becomes, rather, a starting point for political deliberation and the cultivation of public will. The myth of the autonomous subject was that the subject could decide alone. The fact of the desiring and befuddled subject is that a person needs to think through things and choose *in the company of others*.



But the company of others is hard to find in a global and complex world. And this brings us to the third and final part of this story. I have outlined two narratives of democracy and two concomitant narratives of media. One story is that democratic governance occurs through using the media to manufacture public will; the other I perhaps haven't articulated as clearly, but it is that democracy might stand a chance through using media to help cultivate and articulate public will.

Let me try to explain what this might mean. Part of this story I laid out in my recent book, *Democracy and the Political Unconscious*. The usual account of human development is that infants move from helplessness to independence; a better explanation is that infants move from speechlessness to participation. Just watch a child develop and you will see that urge to be part of a larger world. This is not to say that one is subsumed by it, but that one strives to be part of it by individuating oneself, making plain and meaningful one's own desires and aspirations. It seems that the general impetus is that to be human is to be part of something larger than oneself. In small face-to-face communities this can be achieved by having a role in society that allows one to be heeded and heard. In larger more anonymous societies, this kind of participation becomes more difficult. During the 20th century, as society became more complex and media increasingly one-way, alienation was on the rise, with sociologists of the 1950s worrying about “mass man,” alienation, group think, anonymity, and the new empty order.

Something shifted by the close of the century. In the media it began with a few journalists at small-town papers who started questioning the journalistic norms of disinterestedness, impartiality, and objectivity. As

their small towns began to stumble and falter, they wondered, if there were to be no town, there'd be no town paper—so shouldn't the paper concern itself with the fate of the town? Within a few years, a movement known as

We've gone from the few-to-many model to the many-to-many reality.

“public” or “civic” journalism took off, with thinkers—from NYU's Jay Rosen to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch's* editor Cole Campbell—advocating a more engaged form of journalism that saw itself committed to the fate of its communities and interested in helping to form publics, in the Deweyan sense, and not merely inform them in the old journalistic sense. The leading thinkers of this movement were very clear about where they stood philosophically: against Lippmann and with Dewey. That movement was powerful; but the powers that be had their way with it, discredited it as journalism that pandered to the public, that let the public and not the professionals decide what news would be above the fold. By the late 1990s, that movement was pretty much beaten down, though journalists around the world, especially in Africa and in small-town-U.S. papers continue to practice its principles.

But as public journalism fell out of favor, a new term came into consciousness: *citizen media*. The big shift was the rise of digital media in the 1990s, which really came into its own in this past decade. During the analog age, media content was at its most pure when it was produced. Copies of analog media were never as perfect or pristine as the original. Think of the cassette recordings we made back in

those days. A copy of a copy of a copy was scratchy and barely audible. The original producer had the original product—and the power that came with that.

In the digital era, a copy is as perfect as the original. There is no degradation from original to copy. The producer no longer has sole power, for anyone with a copy has, in effect, the original. And as production technologies become more affordable, most anyone can become a producer. Artists no longer rely in the same way on record labels, on the culture industry, to produce their goods; they can do it themselves. And with the Internet, they don't have to rely on middlemen to distribute their



goods; they can do *that* themselves. In a very short decade, we've gone from the few-to-many model to the many-to-many reality. The broadcast era has been supplanted by the digital one.

It's easy to get gleeful, especially if one is a bit of a technological determinist. The old broadcast technology seemed to spell doom for democracy, since the people were only subject to, never really authors of, public

culture. That anyone can be an artist and a producer, though, doesn't necessarily mean that all is rosy and well, that democracy has arrived. There's still that old problem of the culture industry or more generally of how old ideologies and hegemonic structures determine our self-understanding and desires. How many blogs today are devoted to covering pop culture, fashion, celebrity, and trivia? To what extent have people harnessed these new media for democratic ends?

What would that look like?

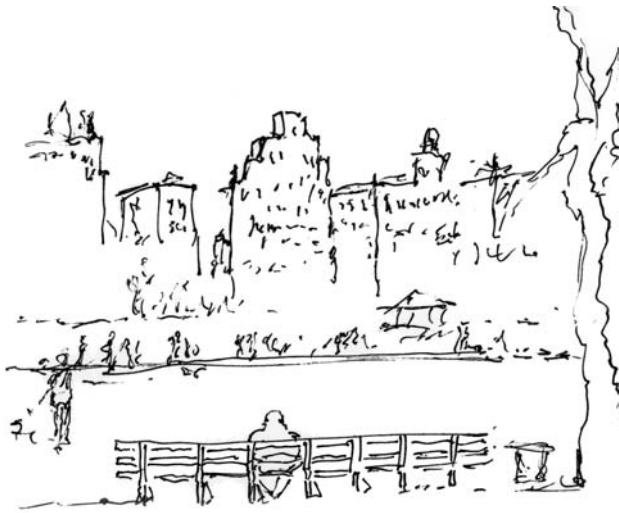
I think these are live questions, and they're questions I'm trying to explore in my work and in the work that I have the opportunity to help shape. Now that media are more interactive than ever, what kind of interactivity is of democratic value? I'd like to look more at how old public TV and radio stations are responding positively to the new media and political environments, especially as they themselves move away from being satellite dishes and move toward being new public squares.

And what then is the place for the old role of journalism as informer? I think there's a value, but it's one that gets crossed up with problems of expertise and professionalism that run counter to democratic aspirations. How can people themselves use media to help create a more inclusive public world? What

difference does it make when media run many to many? In an increasingly polarized political climate, can people use new media to create spaces that are more inclusive or are they destined to repeat their polarizations in cyberspace?

As a theorist interested in psychoanalysis and hermeneutics, I'm especially interested in these two processes: how media can be used for successful sublimation and how media can be used to create meaning. On the latter I'm especially thinking about Dewey's observations that there aren't just brute facts waiting to be articulated. In our communication, we decide how things are meaningful. Meaning is made in our articulations. I'm already bogged, here at the dawn of this new era, by how new media will create and proliferate opportunities for cultivating new meanings, new connections, and relationships. I barely have the words to describe this, but I can assure you, dear reader, public, listener, that there's more going on here than we have yet to imagine even on the level of semiotics, and even more so at the level of the political.

Noëlle McAfee is an associate research professor at the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University and associate editor of the Kettering Review. Her most recent book, Democracy and the Political Unconscious, was published this past spring by Columbia University Press.





200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799 (937) 434-7300

444 North Capitol Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478

6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016 (212) 686-7016