

Review

Graeme Turner, *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*. London, Sage: Macmillan. Pbk £25.99. Hbk £77.00. 200pp.

Simon Cross, Nottingham Trent University

Graeme Turner's fine book *Ordinary People and the Media* explores the structural shifts in western media that have given ordinary people extraordinary visibility as/in media content. I have my own experience of being an ordinary viewer 'as content' having had a central role in a British TV 'right of reply' programme where I played the aggrieved viewer who wanted more TV reporting on the European Union. My role was faked – I was recruited rather than volunteered, was more enamoured of the filthy lucre on offer than the chance to hold journalists, EU politicians and Brussels bureaucrats to account and was happy to ditch my own questions for those prepared by the programme producer – still, I did a good job of presenting my personal, heartfelt criticism that British television was failing its viewers on EU matters. I confess my part in this modest travesty of a public access programme to make the obvious but important point that heightened visibility of ordinary people on television does not mean they set the agenda on political issues.

Turner's argument in *Ordinary People and the Media* is critical of the politics of people-participation and his insightful account examines the cultural consequences of this phenomenon. The thrust of Turner's criticism (using largely US and Australian illustrations, but with international resonances) is that the character and scale of ordinary people's participation, especially in entertainment and journalism formats, compromises the basic impulse of *democratization* in political affairs that such heightened visibility seems to offer. However, Turner side-steps any fully realized sense of what might be constituted as 'democratic' in the context of ordinary people (over-?)populating the new media landscape preferring instead to develop the concept of the 'demotic' (meaning 'of or for the common people') in the media's use of ordinary people as content. In doing so, Turner demonstrates the importance of investigating the strengths and weaknesses of this 'demotic turn' across a number of platforms, not least to examine the limits of the profiles given to the public.

Turner explores celebrity and tabloid culture; reality TV; blogs and blogging; talk radio; and user-generated content online. Readers might anticipate Turner's discovery that the demotic turn is, in fact, not much more than commercial exploitation of our most vulnerable fellow citizens - especially in celebrity formats. Certainly, in the case of *Big Brother*, we've seen how the show has repeatedly given ordinary people a 'media profile' predicated on exposing and performing the embarrassments of social class or fragile mental health – a far cry from the lofty promises of a surveillance experiment producing psychological and social insight/revelation.

Turner's analysis tends to avoid detailed observations about reality TV (or any of the other cases) because his critique explores broader power relations between western media and audiences, even while the latter are central participants. Turner argues that ordinary people's visibility in the media is best understood as an economic strategy and demonstrates how media conglomerates have reinforced the entertainment industry at the expense of, say, investigative journalism. This is why, Turner stresses, the rhetoric of 'cultural empowerment' that frames talk of rich possibilities of media and audience interactivity does not necessarily lead to diversity of choices, views, opinions for viewers as citizens, but to their commodification within the media economy.

Turner's exploration of the demotic within and across the media forms noted above shows how the politics of participation are not democratic *per se*, but rather are contingent and instantiated and therefore never determined in advance. Thus, in the case of citizens, blogs and the rise of public opinion the author notes that audience participation in the production of news content has led to a fusing of news with entertainment. The problem Turner sees is that 'news agendas are narrowing and their content is mutating into hybridized infotainment genres' (p. 72). This is important for understanding how the democratic potential of Joe Public blogging in the sphere of politics (i.e. interconnectivity) is in actuality unlikely to reshape the news agenda. Sure, blogs are an opportunity for ordinary folk to express views or interact in political dialogue but most of what gets written about on political blogs *reflects* the news agenda. Political communication scholars and commentators who celebrate blogging would do well to draw on Turner's notion of the demotic to avoid over-stating the democratizing potentials of citizen blogging - the blogosphere may more often resemble an echo chamber.

The same charge can be levelled against ordinary people's participation in US and Australian talk radio. Reading Turner's chapter on this topic I wondered why anyone would seek the momentary opportunity to shout a vague point before it is hijacked by a populist shock-jock. The concerns of this chapter were therefore initially of less immediate resonance to this reader not least because talk radio in the British public service broadcasting regulatory context does still insulate ordinary folk who participate from the nasty commodifying

tendencies that Turner identifies and which ensures that participants in British talk radio are usually properly addressed as citizens.

The final main chapter of *Ordinary People and the Media* deals with DIY websites offering user-generated content – YouTube being the most ubiquitous. Turner outlines the various arguments of digital optimists before giving us a democratic ‘reality check’: which is to say he makes clear, that while YouTube may offer space for the empowerment of ‘producers’, it also enables international commercial entertainment content, so that what gets seen gets more seen. Here, Turner develops the important argument that while the entertainment industry is promoting interactivity - which looks creative – it is also at the same time exploiting free labour. The political implications of interactivity are still up for debate he tells us, but the argument and broad findings of this chapter forcefully questions the rhetorics of empowerment surrounding DIY websites and social networking sites. Quoting Terranova, Turner points out that ‘the links between the digital optimists and the interests of capital are ‘too tight for comfort’ (p. 151). This is good stuff indeed for getting a generation of students brought up on YouTube and other social networking sites to think critically.

Turner’s book will find a home on student reading lists for courses dealing in media and cultural studies, journalism, cultural sociology, and the like. It also strikes me that this book has particular purchase for anyone interested in knowing more about relations between media and democracy. Turner’s analysis of the media’s demotic turn expands our critical understanding of how the unprecedented participation of ordinary people in the media may look somehow democratic by virtue that ordinary folk are there, filling in the media content, taking part, having a voice. But it is an illusion. This exploration of the media’s demotic turn reveals the power of media elites remains pretty much intact.