

# TELEVISION AND DEMOCRACY

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Peter Dahlgren: *Television and the Public Sphere: Citizenship, Democracy and the Media*. Sage, London 1995.

William Hoynes: *Public Television for Sale: Media, the Market, and the Public Sphere*. Westview, Boulder, CO 1994.

Marc Raboy, ed.: *Public Broadcasting for the 21st Century*. University of Luton Press, Luton 1996.

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On March 3, 1991 Los Angeles police engaged in a high speed auto chase through the streets of urban areas until they were able to apprehend a man named Rodney King. As is often their custom, four white police officers gave the black King a brutal beating with night sticks while he lay on the ground after exiting his car. On this particular night, however, an amateur video photographer was trying out his new camcorder and happened to catch the beating on tape. The subsequent display of the grainy images of police brutality on national television touched off resentment in the urban ghettos of L.A. that eventually erupted in rioting, arson, and violence that resulted in millions of dollars in damage and a number of deaths upon the announcement that the police officers were found innocent of wrongdoing.

The events of what became known as the Rodney King case provide an interesting way of thinking about Habermas's distinction between the public and private sphere, which undergirds much of the theorising about television's role in modern society represented in the three new books listed above. The event started in the private sphere: George Holliday, the photographer, bought a camera mass-marketed for the home consumer to shoot private scenes of family life. Law enforcement

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resides in the public sphere, but when police officers routinely beat suspects after car chases, instead of an official policy, we have a private understanding between the officers and their clientele. Holliday's amateur images of police brutality obliterate the distinction between public and private, effectively thrusting images from the backstage onto the frontstage with chaotic and disturbing consequences. As the eighty seconds of privately photographed video rapidly became a media event, it became clear that there was little official policy that could predict or martial the public response, which could be described as a return of the repressed.

In the court trial, lawyers effectively denatured the video images by freeze-frame and slow-motion techniques that worked to diminish the effect for jurors considering the case. In the court of public opinion, however, there seemed to be no other way to judge the frequently televised images than as raw police brutality with racial overtones. As the riot erupted, following the announcement of acquittal, it became clear that television coverage of the ensuing carnage in effect added fuel to the fire. Angry, disenfranchised members of the L.A. underclass saw images of destruction and anarchy on the television and rushed out into the streets to join the mayhem. As is usually the case with American ghetto uprisings, the victims of the arson and pillaging were the businesses located in the ghettos. CNN featured images of Korean immigrants protecting their ghetto liquor stores with shotguns. The well-protected suburbs where the jury lived were for the most part untouched.

Peter Dahlgren and William Hoynes both idealistically hope that television can enter the public sphere and strengthen the justice promised by democracy and its precepts. Hoynes writes: "In an increasingly complex (and often highly secretive) government bureaucracy, television journalists serving in some sense as representatives of the viewing public can uncover and publicise official misdeeds, providing citizens with the resources they need to act" (27). The Rodney King case suggests that either the public is woefully short on the resources needed for responsible action when injustice is exposed in a democracy, or that television's conduct and role in civil society is in need of dramatic overhaul.

Hoynes' book *Public Television For Sale: Media, the Market, and the Public Sphere*, is, despite its pessimistic title, an impressive argument for ways in which television could become a proactive and responsible force in the public sphere. Hoynes confines his purview to that of non-commercial television broadcasting in the United States, and even as he is authoritative on the limitations on public broadcasting as it is presently practised, he is hopeful about its possibilities. This does not prevent him from warning: "The reinvigoration of the public sphere will not be accomplished simply by reforming our public television system. Public television is, nevertheless, a necessary site in which to take this challenge"(177).

Michael Tracey's survey of American public broadcasting in Raboy's anthology is far less optimistic about the possibility that PBS (Public Broadcasting System) could become a positive force in the American public sphere. He mockingly calls shows such as "Front-line" and "The American Experience" "the great and good, the senior clerics of the established church of American public broadcasting." These are the very programs that Hoynes holds out as showing the promise of what PBS could be. The central dilemma that both Tracey and Hoynes acknowledge is that PBS in America is only watched by a tiny minority of the overall audience, according to rating services 2-3 per cent of the viewing audience. Advocates of PBS argue that this 2-3 per cent is

