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# Domesticating the Simpsons

## - Four Types of Citizenship in Monitorial Democracy

Inspired by Michael Schudson, four types of historically informed citizenship, cast in the cartoon characters of the Simpsons, are presented as a promising framework for studies of mediated democracy in network society. The four types of citizenship, however, cannot be imported wholesale. They must be politically domesticated and historically amended before application to Danish settings.

The citizen is the X of political calculus: the great unknown without whom it is difficult to justify representative and public opinion-driven democracy. Institutional legitimacy rests upon the argument that ordinary men and women are capable of taking part in communal matters, saturated by social norms defining how individuals are expected to act collectively as good citizens. In current debates – among scholars as well as journalists – X is discussed primarily in order to document how poorly current affairs live up to the ideals of *informed* citizenship, loosely defined as a set of deliberative norms partly traceable back to the agora of antiquity, partly to the dawning of the European liberalism, and partly to the American Progressive Era of the early 20th century.

In this article, I shall challenge this nostalgic view that postulates a historical fall of public man (Habermas 1962; Sennett 1977). We also challenge the futuristic optimism that hails the new technology as a liberator of democratic participation (Grossman 1995; Tsagarousianou & Tabini 1997). In line with Mazzoleni & Schultz (1999: 247), we regard political mediatization neither as democratic decline nor as technological emancipation, but rather, as a gradual development whereby “political institutions increasingly are dependent on and shaped by mass media, but nevertheless remain in control of political processes and functions.” More specifically, we compare historically constituted types of citizenship in Denmark and the United States of

America in order to demonstrate how X may be segmented and how different groups of citizens interact with the news media over time. The comparative approach places shifting concepts of citizenship at the very core of representative democracy as justifications for public talk and political action, spun by governing elites, framed by professional journalists, and primed by networking niches of everyday life.

In doing so, inspiration has been found in an historically informed typology of American civic life as presented by Michael Schudson (1998; 1999 & this journal p. 6-14). Schudson illustrates his sociological framework with characters from the television cartoon series *The Simpsons*. His four ideal types of citizenship shall be amended and domesticated by drawing upon recent research in Danish media development (Bruhn Jensen 2003; Lund 2004) and supplemented with representative survey data (Lund 2003a; Modinet 2003). Schudson's main thesis is that historical links between information and democracy as well as citizenship and mass media are hardly as tight as communications scholars tend to make them. Professional news providers are undoubtedly important mediators for public debate; however, neither journalists nor spin doctors are uncontested drivers of civic life. Political communications research should therefore not merely inquire as to what news media do to the masses, but also what different types of citizens do to mediated democracy.

### Changing concepts of citizenship

In ordinary Danish usage, the word 'borger' (citizen) is mainly used in the plural as a pseudonym for 'people writ large' or 'the mass public', as opposed to 'elites' or 'experts' (Korsgaard 2004; Lund 2003b). In mediated discourse, 'the people' are not expected to leave prosaic interest behind in the private sphere before entering the political realm. This democratic trespassing of the borders between public/private and civil society/state stands in marked contrast to critical theory (Arendt 1958), defining proper citizens in opposition to *animal laborans* and *homo faber*. In her classical study on the human condition, Hannah Arendt stresses that ordinary household activities do not belong in the public realm of free speech and political action. Citizenship is not merely rights-based, but an obligation to take a stand on public issues based on informed reasoning, rather than prejudice, force and coercion. Material contexts and communitarian networks are publicly irrelevant: "Not Athens but the Athenians were the *polis*" (Arendt 1958: 195).

"Habermas not only separates 'the public' from private individuals, but also from the state."

In Danish media research, Hannah Arendt has had limited impact, but in the same line of thought Jürgen Habermas (1962) has put a lasting fingerprint on the way modern citizen-based democracy is perceived and analyzed. Habermas not only separates 'the public' from private individuals, but also from the state: only by stepping into the public realm disengaged from material limitations and personal appetites are free and equal citizens fully capable to deliberate in the consensus-seeking company of their peers. Within this critical framework – imperialized by commercial media – informed citizenship has been discussed academically as the normative ideal for political participation. Stated bluntly, the idealized citizens of critical theory are expected to gather in the agora, producing an informed 'we-ship' as opposed to a variety of idiosyncratic 'me-ships' (Lund 2002).

In his counter-argument, Shudson (1998) claims that there is no such thing as a single uniform public sphere constituted by one particular type of good citizenship. Within a shifting historical context, there are

many different ways in which public opinion-based political systems may operate. Shudson specifically documents how the founders of the American republic had only a limited interest in making the actions of public officials open to surveillance and deliberation. He does not refute that a central concern of representative democracy was to inform and monitor the political actions of public officials. But taking his clues from federal history, he finds that the founders of the American Constitution dealt with these problems by establishing mechanisms of checks and balances. Taking his cue from this institutional premise, Schudson (1999) proposes not one, but four complementary types of citizenship developing gradually in an ongoing struggle between liberal and communitarian politics:

1. Trust-Based Public Life – exemplified by Marge Simpson
2. Party-Based Public Life – exemplified by Homer Simpson
3. Information-Based Public Life – exemplified by Lisa Simpson
4. Rights-Based Public Life – exemplified by Bart Simpson

The four types are successive in time, but not mutually exclusive, i.e. none of them have totally subsumed the others. Consequently, reducing public man to an informed citizen of only one particular kind must be regarded as a poor reading of political history. We find many parallels to the American development of public life in the Danish context, though also a number of differences. Political participation has never been quite the same – partly due to differences in the party systems and media traditions. Important for the development of citizenship, the civil wars of 1864 were a federal fusion in the USA and a national fission in Denmark. In terms of news media, public service norms dominate the electronic media in Denmark. This has never been the case in the USA.

While conflicts between liberalists and communitarians dominate the current American debate on citizenship and mediated democracy, Danish concerns are primarily voiced as tensions within a representative democracy based upon public service solidarity versus libertarian free riders challenging the public negotiation

of domestic welfare norms (Pedersen 2000). Accordingly, we propose to modify Schudson's framework of public life by considering the peculiar frameworks of political legitimacy, i.e. domesticating Schudson (and the Simpsons) in line with the historical development of communitarian, associational, informed and libertarian citizenship in Denmark 1776-2005.

### **Marge: The Communitarian Citizen**

The first type of citizenship – cast in the role of Marge, the Simpson family mother – have few rights and many democratic obligations. Trust-based citizenship of this kind was developed in closely monitored networks of agrarian communities. Citizens were not expected to be fully informed about public life, but merely to exercise common sense in order to acclaim the best-suited characters for public office. The trust-based obligation of citizenship is, in Schudson's words,

“to recognize virtue well enough to be able to know and defeat its counterfeit. Citizens were supposed to turn back the ambitious and self-seeking at the polls. But they were not to evaluate public issues themselves. That was what representatives were for” (1999: 2).

Around the time of the American Declaration of Independence, the Danish peasant was formally granted national citizenship (1776), followed by the lifting of adscription' in 1788. Local self-government was not introduced until 1840, however, and the censored press (like the educational system) was actively supporting an elite of land owners governing on behalf of the King – not the people. Magazines and pamphlets mainly promoted community virtues and practical skills – not political participation. Schooling and reading were censored instruments of the state, embedding subjects firmly into the established order of family, congregation, township, municipality and nation.

The Danish Constitution of 1849 exclusively granted voting rights to males. The national government continued to be run by landowners, and, until the 1870s, the electorate loyally confirmed the governing elite. Citizens behaved as responsible subjects with a stake in the Kingdom; not as autonomous political actors with indi-

vidual rights. The constitution did license freedom of speech, but the mass media propagated patriotic loyalty to the governing few rather than free and critical debate on worldly matters.

Gradually, however, trust-based citizenship in Denmark became communitarian with an associational accent. The emergence of voluntary associations mediated the frontier between state and society. Associations were not primarily founded for political purposes; they were production-oriented (e.g. dairies and slaughterhouses) supplemented with cooperative stores, savings banks, folk high schools, sick-benefit associations etc. The prevalence of community networks and voluntary associations enjoyed government acceptance. Even during the most ideologically heated discussions in the late 1880s, the conservative government did not attempt to crush the oppositional farmers' associations “because in the last instance, most politicians knew that it was crucial to the development of the country” (Kaspersen & Ottesen 2001: 114).

“The emergence of voluntary associations mediated the frontier between state and society.”

The Danish tradition of 'samarbejdende folkestyre' (negotiated democracy) became ideologically informed by Grundtvigianism, a religiously founded belief in 'the people' within an enlightened and opinion-based monarchy (Korsgaard 2004). Consensus was promoted through democratic discourse. The central medium for public debate was communities of peers, i.e. networks in geographically constituted niches. The communicative ideal was oral rather than written. Voters (male only until 1915) were expected to participate in discussions about the common good but had little direct influence upon representative politics.

Network democracy of this kind was localized with representative officials acting as trustees of a communitarian good rather than protagonists for (party-)political programs. The Marges were only loosely tied to a national framework, mediated to a much lesser extent than today. However, communitarian politics did not automatically create a democratic consensus. On the contrary, in the wake of the War of 1864 resulting in the

Danish loss of Schleswig-Holstein, political conflicts emerged along partisan lines of voting behavior. Local niches of collective action became building blocks for national associations providing the training grounds for political participation.

### **Homer: The Associational Citizen**

The second type – cast in the role of Homer, the Simpson family father – is an associational citizen with a political party affiliation. In the USA, this civic character was met by skepticism from communitarian elites on the grounds that political parties tended to become clientelistic in their preoccupation with the distribution of lucrative offices. Voluntary associations became campaign machines, and membership was more about comradeship than any attachment to political principles, something akin to Homer Simpson's loyalty to a favorite sports team. For the rank-and-file, voting was less a matter of assent than a statement of affiliation: the people were brought to the polls by 'drink, dollars, and drama' (Schudson 1999: 4)

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In Denmark, ideological conflicts played a stronger role in party-based associational life. In the late 19th century, constitutional conflicts fuelled a competitive party press reflecting material interests of social classes, when the conservative government refused to respect parliamentary census. From the 1870s, the Danish working class started to organize in earnest. Partisan demarcation lines gradually influenced the electorate. In this process, the agrarian organizations (often in pragmatic coalitions with the Social Democratic labor movement) were more effective than the conservative clubs of the ruling elite nursed networks of local niches for political purposes.

By the end of the 19th century, the majority of Danes mediated their political opinion by way of voluntary associations delegating bargaining power to their representatives at the national level. Competing party newspapers performed an important role in these conflicts, framing the political conflicts leading to the so-called

'systemskifte' in 1901 (parliamentary based majority rule). The political struggles institutionalized political mass parties and partisan news media. The party press created a new sense of belonging, not merely to a local community, but to a national constituency based on class affiliations and ideological principles.

Differing markedly from the politics of the USA, Danish parties did not become election machines geared mainly to clientelism in a polarized two-party spoils system (Hallin & Manchini 2004). Four political coalitions became long-lasting political parties devoted to ideologically founded policy alternatives, but also dedicated to pragmatic deliberation. Representatives of conflicting interest groups bargained and negotiated not only in parliament, but also in local municipalities and city councils in which community consensus was the rule rather than the exception. Instead of drink, dollars and drama, 'coffee, cake and cosiness' became the Danish shorthand for associational citizenship.

Party-based democracy did not eclipse trust-based public life. Local networks were essential – not only to the Marges, but also to the Danish Homers. The farmers expanded their cooperative movements, and the labor unions fought successfully for collective bargaining. The Social Democratic movement was particularly expansive, offering party-affiliated networks from cradle to grave, including co-operative stores, sports clubs, burial parlors and more.

The Danish party press from the late 19th until the mid 20th century has been termed the "political four-paper system" (Thomsen 1972). In all major towns, the national parties published local newspapers. This system culminated around the First World War with more than 250 dailies printed five to seven days a week. Each paper served a niche of loyal readers with an average circulation of 3-4000 copies. Despite the localized site of publishing, most of the content was provided by centrally distributed party-controlled agencies constituting competing networks of information and propaganda. The journalistic separation of news from views was by no means standard procedure.

Just as the Marges were communitarian with an associational twist, most of the Danish Homers were party-based with a relatively strong commitment to their local community. News media were also localized identity providers serving not only community markets but

also the national project of the welfare state – framed in a partisan manner. Party membership first fell markedly in Denmark in the late 1950s. The four-party press survived well into the 1960s, but only one newspaper survived in most communities as a local ‘omnibus’, i.e. a mass medium for all as opposed to a mouthpiece for special interests.

This, in turn, paved the way for ideals of objective journalism and editorial autonomy. Schudson (1995) identifies this development of informed citizenship with the so-called progressive era in the aftermath of the First World War reacting against associational tendencies towards the clientelism of party-based politics: informed citizenship was heralded as the most effective antidote, reforming not only election practices, but also the party-biased media system. In Denmark, however, the political parties kept control with their associations of newspapers, but informed citizenship was promoted by public service radio – a phenomenon inspired by the British BBC, contrasting markedly from the commercial broadcasting of the USA.

### **Lisa: The Informed Citizen**

The third type of citizenship – cast in the role of Lisa, the daughter in the Simpson family – portrays an informed voter, familiar with the political issues at hand and expecting the rational governing of current affairs. The non-party citizen involved with political matters in an objectivist fashion – freed from material concerns, unrelated to household interests and personal appetites – became the democratic ideal for political participation: “This blinds us to the virtues of trust-based, party-based, and rights-based models of citizenship in its dogged emphasis on a rationalistic, information-based model” (Shudson 1999:2).

The history of informed citizenship in the USA differs markedly from the development in Denmark. In the former, an elite of skeptical intellectuals dominated the debate (Bybee 1999), demanding progressive reform from a clientelistic and self-serving party system. The American reformers succeeded in terms of changing voting procedures, but not in their crusade for the improved political education of public man. In Denmark, on the other hand, the political parties themselves initiated the quest for informed citizenship without reforming the party system. Instead, they

created a consensual institution for educational purposes: public service broadcasting.

When restrictions on radio communications were lifted after World War One, commercial and political interests were gaining control over the new mass medium. Wavelength scarcity in Denmark made it impossible to frame radio within the established four-party system developed in the newspaper market. In 1925, radio broadcasting was defined as a public utility, a license-financed national service governed by a mini-parliament of political representatives. This manner of organizing broadcasting was inspired by the British BBC, from whom the Danish Broadcasting Corporation (Statsradiofonien/DR) also imported guiding principles for content as an “educative force for the improvement of knowledge, taste, and manners” (Scannell 1996: 122). Instead of focusing on political controversy, commercial interests and popular entertainment, the public service media were expected to offer a balanced diet of cultural programs.

Public service radio tied social classes together in a virtual network, promoting national unity and informed citizenship. An important implication was that the public sphere should not be fully demarcated from the state. Contrary to liberal dogma, a mixed order of current affairs was presented by public service radio (as well as non-commercial television as of 1951), providing the framework for an imagined community (Andersson 1983) of democratic consensus. Political balance was crucial in order to legitimize the monopoly status of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation. Consequently, curfews were placed on election coverage and the production of daily news was collectively controlled by representatives of the party press.

The four-paper system declined after the Second World War, resulting in a concentration process. In spite of substantial party subsidies, the weaker papers closed and the newspaper market was left to consist of 35 titles (2005). The winners of this race for circulation were inclined to drop or dilute their party affiliation in order to gain more subscribers. A non-partisan tradition of ‘public service for private money’ prevailed. Journalism gradually developed a more critical and independent status with the investigative monitoring of political matters as the professional ethos. Interviews became the favored format for reporting, not only in radio and television, but also in the former party press.

The informed citizenship ideal rendered legitimacy to this development, not primarily by active consent but rather by being defined by professional journalists and public opinion polls as an attentive audience of concerned citizens demanding not only public education, but also political action by proxy. Recent research (Modinet 2003) documents that the majority of Danish Lisas are politically knowledgeable but less personally engaged in political activities on the community and associational levels than the Marges and Homers.

"The public sphere should neither be regarded as a civil arena demarcated from the state, nor from the private realm."

#### **Bart: The Libertarian Citizen**

The fourth kind of citizenship – personified by Bart, the son in the Simpson family – is the prototype of rights-oriented public man. Schudson (1998: 4) regards the civil rights movement in the US as the key to a widening web of constitutional guarantees based on an expanded understanding of individual entitlements, state obligations and due process of law. This, in turn, promoted a public persona for whom suing and consuming became important means of political participation along with voting and (more rarely) membership of civic organizations.

Development in Denmark has been less legalistic, but 'politics from below' (Hoff & Storgaard 2005) in public life is also detected here. We find chapters of altruistic civil rights movements in Danish political life, but also a growing number of rights-oriented individuals acting in a self-serving manner. The former species of rights-based citizenship had its heyday in the 1970s, combining informational and rights-oriented values, supporting worthy causes, and disregarding both community loyalty and party dogma. Grassroots activism prompted critical attitudes towards 'the establishment' – including traditional political parties and public service broadcasting. Trust-based government was viewed as 'false consciousness', and political debate was not primarily regarded as a democratic means towards associational consensus, but an instrument for the mobilization of the masses in order to change 'the system'. The rights-based legitimacy of political activism gradually turned critical journalists from its traditional lo-

cus of institutional politics towards politicizing private problems and focusing on individual case reporting. An important implication of this kind of mediated politics is that the public sphere should neither be regarded as a civil arena demarcated from the state, nor from the private realm. 'Publish the private', became the popular slogan of activism in 1968. Linking private problems to networks of worthy causes, protesters voiced public (but not necessarily collective nor majority) opinions, nursing the news media as an effective platform for political activism. These activities paved the way not only for minority rights, but also for self-serving free riders.

The semi-detached attitudes towards communitarian norms combine activist citizenship with consumerism in a libertarian fashion. Fuelled by new information technology, virtual communities and anonymous chat on the World Wide Web substitute personal and associational participation. New niches and networks are created, mediated by computers, mobile phones and other electronic devices. This development does not render the old forms of democratic action obsolete, but it tends to weaken the integrative role of public service media and political parties as arenas for forming political consensus.

The libertarian citizen profits from the harvest of associational and informed public life, with little inclination to contribute to the community; unless such efforts are presently in line with the individual pursuit of happiness. While civil rights activism may be regarded as a fleeting sub-species of informed and associational citizenship, the Danish welfare state has fostered an enduring stock of libertarian protesters differing markedly from the Schudsonian type of rights-based altruism.

It may be argued, of course, that the libertarian Bart is by no means a modern phenomenon. Free riders have existed in all societies in all times. But not until recently has it been acceptable to publicly proclaim attitudes of this kind, i.e. mocking community values and scrapping associational participation. This type of political behavior was formerly expected to be domesticated and civilized by community trust, associational discipline and public service broadcasting in order to earn legitimate status of 'citizen' – employing not only human rights, but also social obligations defined by the nation state.

In this respect, Danish membership in the Europe-

an Community (EU) represented a political watershed. In the wake of the referendum on European Community membership in 1972, the party system was scattered into new fractions criticizing the traditional political consensus from both left and right. The party-based media system was gradually shot to pieces. The party-governed monopoly of public service television was not formally abolished until 1988, though the national media market was split into fragmented niches segmenting the audience long before that.

Finally, in the late 1990s, the Internet opened new frontiers for political participation by proxy. The Danish Barts grow up to become 'netizens' with access to global networks but little commitment to the local ones. New forms of political influence are exercised on the World Wide Web (Hoff & Storgaard 2005). Meanwhile, professional journalism has become increasingly skeptical towards representatives of political authority, but rarely applies the same skepticism towards niche actors who are able to frame their interest in terms of informed and rights-based citizenship (Bro 1998). Hence, the epidemic growth of case journalism and so-called reality series presenting libertarian individuals as the *vox pop* of network democracy, demanding public attention justified in personal rights and private problems.

### Monitorial democracy

The four types of citizenship represent phases of political history, but all of them are alive and kicking. Little mediated attention, however, is currently paid to communitarian and associational aspects of public life (Lund 2002). Even under the hype of globalization, localized values of public life are cherished by a majority of Danes according to recent surveys (Modinet 2003). The trust-based values of Marge Simpson are hailed by the larger proportion of Danes (31 percent of the Modinet sample). These communitarian citizens tend to cast their votes for parties traditionally positioned to the right or in the center of the Danish political spectrum. National democracy is regarded as an arena for elected representatives – not for civic deliberation. Marges enjoy talking with friends and family about domestic problems, but they rarely take part in the public discourse on political issues. Asked about democratic participation, the Marges strongly believe that citizens primarily have an obligation to monitor national decision making

rather than influence it directly. Public life is localized in community networks and associational niches. Political information is gathered from traditional mass media, rarely from the Internet.

The Homers (24 percent of the Modinet sample) are overrepresented among Social Democratic voters. They are dedicated consumers of mass mediated politics and regard public service media as significantly more credible than commercial media. Relatively few of them are active on the Internet. They prefer political discussions face-to-face in networks of voluntary associations, e.g. political parties, unions and trade organizations. They do not regard themselves as particularly active participants in political decision making and express strong support for representative democracy.

"The Homers are overrepresented among Social Democratic voters."

The Lisas (25 percent of the Modinet sample) are significantly better educated than the average Dane and tend to vote for parties to the left and in the center – particularly the Social Liberals. The Lisas regard broadsheet newspapers and public service media as indispensable sources of political information. They not only discuss political news and views face-to-face, but also on the Internet, investing more time on national and international issues than local ones. To informed Lisas, Danish politics do not represent an isolated phenomenon, but rather, an integrated aspect of global democracy mediated by numerous different channels of communications.

The Barts (15 percent of the Modinet sample) vote to a lesser degree than other Danes. Those who do spread their vote evenly along the left-right spectrum. The younger they are, the more likely they are to vote to the right. This may indicate that the rights-oriented spirit of the late 1960s, which in its outset was markedly leftist, has been transformed into more right-wing preferences, i.e. skepticism regarding tax burdens and welfare norms. The majority of Barts also differ from the rest of the Danes by placing less emphasis on public service media and newspaper reading. They expect to get news for free and engage themselves in virtual networks



**TABLE 1:** Index of democratic core values defined by four types of Danish citizens

	Marges	Homers	Lisas	Barts	Sum
Communitarian values	100	40	50	52	242
Associational values	28	100	32	14	174
Informational values	42	41	100	26	209
Libertarian values	25	17	11	100	153
<b>N =</b>	606	130	547	274	1557

of personal interests rather than global concerns. Despite the fact that the four types of citizenship differ in terms of media gratification and political participation, they also share many important characteristics in common. A vast majority of all respondents regard voting not only as an individual right, but also as a democratic obligation – locally as well as nationally. Furthermore, the Danes interviewed do not adhere to only one kind of civic values (see Table 1). Few Marges, Homers and Lisas share the libertarian values of the Barts, but among all the groups, a considerable number regard trust-based public life as a very important aspect of Danish democracy.

If we assign an index 100 to each of the Simpsons (based on the primary democratic value-statements) and add the percentages the secondary values voiced by the survey participants, we find that the communitarian and associational preferences receive a rating of 242 points, as compared with 153 allocated to the libertarian ones. In second place we find informational values with 209 points, while associational values – originally the key feature in Danish network democracy – are granted priority by an index 174.

“Political views must be framed as publicly relevant.”

The priorities documented by the survey data indicate that, even in the 21st century, the majority of Danes prefer trust over voice. We may translate this tendency into a tentative model of mediated democracy, termed by Michael Schudson as *monitorial*, i.e. most citizens may not be personally involved in politics, but most of

them – disregarding differences in civic life orientation – occasionally lend a critical ear to political matters in order “to jump into the political fray and make a lot of noise” (Schudson 1999: 11).

To remain in tune with the cartoon framework, this monitorial approach to politics may be likened to the mute Maggie Simpson, who does not express informed opinion, but merely observes and listens, with an attentive know-it-all gleam in her eye. Occasionally, however, she sounds the alarm. This democratic role strongly resembles the typical attitude of modern journalism in mediated democracy: instead of the mass constituencies and party-controlled media of the past, public life depends upon independent media monitoring citizens' affairs. In order to amend and supplement mediated news and views, political representatives may carry out independent monitoring and conduct polls, surveys and focus group interviews. They may also employ professional media advisors – the so-called ‘spin doctors’. Fundamentally, however, the governing elites depend on public service broadcasting, broadsheet newspapers and Internet bloggers to translate (dis)trust into voice.

Many elected officials regard this production of proxy public opinion as a problematic development granting critical journalism excessive political power. Nevertheless, it is recognized as a legitimate institutional practice by all of the types of citizens under study, despite the fact that the mediated monitoring of democratic decision making is neither justified in a formal constitutional nor strictly deliberative fashion (Mouritsen 1994).

According to a representative sample of Danes (Lund 2003a), the monitorial role of the news media is accepted by 82 percent of the interviewees as legitimate. They confirm that journalists ought to perform a watch-

dog role in democratic politics. We find no indications of nostalgic longing back to 'the good old days' of associational and party-based mass media. On the contrary, the survey reveals strong support for the opposite notion: 80 percent of the respondents believe that democracy has been vitalized by the loosening of ties between news media and political parties enabling journalists to act more independently in political reporting. In short: political authorities must accept the news media as an informal institution of democratic citizenship representing public opinion by proxy.

### The Institution of Citizens' Affairs

In monitorial democracy, authoritative decision makers have few associational Homers to rely on in a party-loyal fashion. Instead, the political agenda is frequently spun by activist Barts and reported by observant Maggies communicating an influential 'we' of libertarian 'me's. In line with Cook (1998), the Danish data suggests that news media act collectively as an Institution of Citizens' Affairs (ICA) priming political action by framing political events, not necessarily determining what the public should think, but rather defining what issues informed citizens are expected to think about (McCombs et al. 1997).

The ICA earns a democratic license to operate from a collective 'we' presented as proxy public opinion (Lund 2003b). Articulate sources are the journalistic testing ground for the public relevance of citizens' affairs, but it is essential for journalism and other institutional sources to claim citizens' support if they want to promote political solutions of merit. In order to do so, political views must be framed as publicly relevant. For practical purposes, editorial routines of the ICA constitute agenda-setting news cycles by selecting a few highlights from the general flow of current affairs. This is rarely based on representative samples of citizens, but frequently grounded in journalistic interviews, e.g. loud Barts reacting against statements from party-loyal Homers, deluging the trusting Marges and the informed Lisas (Lund 2002: 188-189):

- Only a small part of the initiatives and actions that may affect the life-chances of the Simpsons are covered by the news media, in spite of a high degree of journalistic productivity.

- A large number of events that are considered newsworthy end up as solo-nolo stories that are not processed by the news institution as a whole, but only by niche media.
- A very limited number of issues receive coverage with a high degree of homogeneity by most news media setting the political agenda for a period of time.

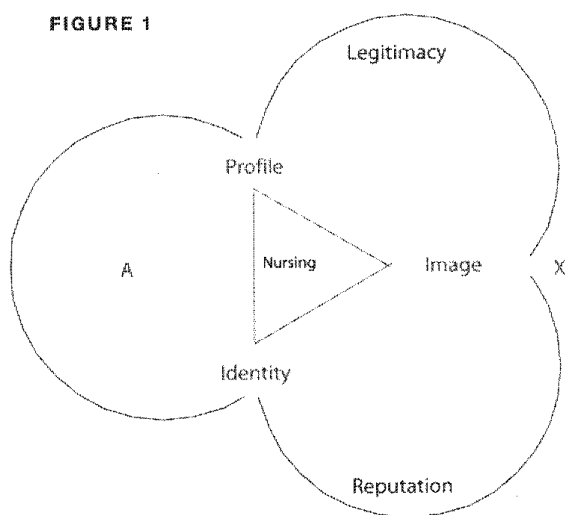
In the ICA, professional journalists hide a great deal of public relevance by framing relatively minor details in current affairs. In so doing, monitorial democracy is not primarily served by journalists in a watchdog role. News media – commercial as well as public service – more typically act as community guard dogs nursing niches of citizens and interest groups by gate-keeping articulated opinion presented as statements of more or less public relevance (Donehue 1995).

The ICA guard dog function not only offers opportunities for top-down manipulation in spin doctor fashion; monitorial gate-keeping also facilitates whistleblowing and other bottom-up activities. Consequently, it becomes essential for interest-driven elites to influence niches of ordinary citizens and their monitorial guard dogs. Political actors (A) nurse their niches by producing news and views in an ecological environment inhabited by competing elites and journalists acting on behalf of more or less informed citizens. Whether or not a particular political input influences the public agenda depends not only upon the message spun, but also upon the tradition, legitimacy and reputation of the communicator as perceived by the audience (X).

"Whether or not a particular political input influences the public agenda depends not only upon the message spun, but also upon the tradition, legitimacy and reputation of the communicator."

Opinion-forming processes performed by more or less professional 'niche nurses' (A) are evaluated differently by the Marges, Homers, Lisas and Barts (X). Political actors in monitorial democracy are unable to pre-

FIGURE 1



sent their opinions in a publicly relevant fashion unless they are favorably framed by gatekeepers nursing the ICA niches in question. With the legitimate objective of making a favorable impression upon a working majority of the audience, political actors employ public relations departments to manage their agendas, appealing not only to trust-based citizens, but also to party-based, information-based and rights-based aspects of X. In order to secure coherence between a legitimate image and a reputed identity, 'niche nurses' profile themselves strategically to different groups of citizens.

In the ICA of monitorial democracy, professional journalists serve as guard dogs, monitoring not only A, but also X. Critical journalism primarily highlights what is professionally regarded as 'newsworthy', e.g. *framing* the activism of the Barts, *spinning* the information-seeking Lisas, and *priming* the trusting Marges and party-loyal Homers. Consequently, tools for segmenting the general public are a must for political actors promoting their interest to the fragmented audience of representative politics. The complexity of X is reduced by niche-nursing public opinion, i.e. employing opinion polls and focus groups. But there are no foolproof means to seduce the general public consisting of niches of citizens with contrasting values and interests.

The Modinet data indicates that spin doctors may occasionally set the agenda of monitorial democracy. In routine journalism, however, attempts at influencing the ICA guard dogs require long-term nursing efforts. Priming and framing cannot be reduced to day-to-day spinning. Ultimately, the perception of political legitimacy depends to a certain degree upon specific deliberati-

ons in the public sphere, but to a much larger degree upon reputation evaluated critically by different types of citizens of whom the vast majority value trust higher than voice (Andriof et al. 2002).

### Conclusion

In this article, we have argued that Michael Schudson's four types of historically informed citizenship (cast in *The Simpsons* cartoon characters) offer a promising framework not only for academic research, but also for strategic niche-nursing in business and politics. The four types of citizenship, however, cannot be imported wholesale from their American context. They must be politically domesticated and historically amended prior to application in non-American settings.

Based on data from the Modinet –research project, we claim that the Danish Simpsons are somewhat more trusting and associational than their American counterparts. The Marges, Homers, Lisas, and Barts of Denmark live together in a relatively peaceful Institution of Citizens' Affairs (ICA), supplementing one another rather than struggling between communitarian and liberal codes of conduct. Public service media has played an important part in these niche-nursing processes. The ICA of Denmark are influenced not only top-down but also bottom-up. Articulate Barts challenge the authoritative consensus by rights-based activism. Informed Lisas influence political agendas with rational arguments changing priorities – mediated by monitoring journalists. Negotiated order is maintained by political compromise rather than winner-take-all confrontations. Political activism is limited in scope, and attention is primarily paid to decision making at the local and national levels.

In Denmark, the Marges and Homers constitute influential premises of political stability by reinforcing associational welfare state norms. Political legitimacy can hardly be obtained without nursing the trust-based values of public life saluted by a majority of voters. Despite the fact that politics and media become increasingly globalized and interactive technology offers transnational means of political influence, new media and virtual networks do not render the old and communitarian ones redundant.

The institutional priming, framing and spinning of public opinion by professional 'niche nurses' is a far cry from the critical ideals of a Habermasian public sphere hailing communicative deliberations and informed citizens-

hip. On the other hand, the development of monitorial democracy can hardly be reduced to a nostalgic narrative of civic decline. The political role of traditional citizenship cannot be systematically ignored. And despite the fact that mo-

onitorial journalists primarily focus on the libertarian Barts and informed Lisas, no political niche can operate effectively without some support from Marges and Homers who may not mediate a lot of noise, but who do critically judge the image and reputation of the competing elites.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Adscription tied the farm workers to the place where they were born and prevented them from leaving the estates without the permission of the landowners.

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