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Deliberative Democracy and Illiteracy: Exploring a Theoretical Gap

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Deliberative Democracy and Illiteracy: Exploring a Theoretical Gap

Abstract

In this essay, I demonstrate that literacy is not necessary for participation in a deliberative democracy. First, I examine the literature on the subject and demonstrate how the necessity of literacy has either been assumed or left entirely unquestioned. I argue that this is a significant gap with major conceptual and normative significance since several democracies have very high illiteracy rates. I reflect upon the overwhelming focus on ideal theory as a method of conceptual and normative analysis, and its inability to provide guidance in cases that depart radically from the ideal- but which are a normal feature of political life in many societies. Next, I examine hypothetical reasons that might be offered against the possibility of illiterate citizens participating meaningfully in the deliberative democratic process. I discuss what it means to be informed, by examining the informational requirements that central principles of deliberative democracy impose upon citizens. This is not an exhaustive account of what it means to be politically informed, but I hope that demonstrating how citizens can satisfy these necessary conditions is instructive in highlighting biases implicit in the objections to my thesis. I highlight the role of non-literary sources and informal political conversation and argue that, while deliberative democrats are correct in criticizing them for their weak deliberative quality, they ought to recognize the informational role that such sites play in the deliberative system. Finally, I end by examining how scepticism towards the possibility of deliberative democracy in semi-literate societies is rooted in biases against non-western experiences of the public sphere and political communication. Deliberative democracy can operate, imperfectly perhaps, even in such unfavourable conditions.

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I) Is Literacy Necessary for Deliberative Democracy?: A Theoretical Gap

1.1 Identifying a Gap

I wish to begin by examining the treatment of the relationship between education/literacy, and democratic citizenship, in the following domains: the discipline of literacy studies; discussions of the notion of ‘citizenship education’; and finally, in political philosophy—particularly in response to multiculturalism and the deliberative turn.

In the field of literacy studies, much controversy has been generated by the ‘literacy hypothesis’. According to this conjecture, the complex democracies of post-Homeric Greece (and the even more complex ones that we see today) would not have been possible without literacy.¹ I wish to point out that the comparison in this debate is between ‘pre-literate’ and ‘literate’ societies. However, today one would be hard pressed to find the kind of pre-literate societies these studies discuss. Instead, we only come across such societies as possessing high, nearly-universal literacy rates, and others with a more or less large illiterate population. For the want of a better term, I refer to the latter as *semi-literate societies*.

An interesting perspective on the question of education and its role in a democracy emerged in the United Kingdom through works that focused on the question of citizenship education (Crick and Heater, 1977; Heater, 1990). These played a vital role in influencing the curricula in schools, and culminated in the famous ‘Crick Report’ (Advisory Group on Citizenship, 1998). Even though the report recognizes the development of an ‘experiential’ understanding of politics through experiences which are not limited to the school, it focuses overwhelmingly on citizenship education schools. This is understandable, given that the aforementioned studies were dedicated to an improvement of the curriculum and political life in the United Kingdom where school enrolment is universal. However, it must be noted simultaneously that Crick (2000: 113) himself saw formal education as a necessary condition for democratic citizenship.

In the realm of political philosophy—the third and final area of analysis—the political philosopher’s interest in the relationship between citizenship and education can be traced back to Plato, whose conception of the ideal state accords a pivotal role to formal education. Not only is this administered by the state, it is also seen as indispensable for establishing a harmony between individual virtue and social justice. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* (1979) sees the role of

¹ For variants of the ‘literacy hypothesis’, see Goody and Watt (1963), Ong (1982), Olson (1977). For a contrary view, see Narasimhan (1991).

education as inculcating a similar respect for political institutions, by creating a reflective citizen instead. Even though he privileges experiential learning over one that is merely bookish, being able to read, however, constitutes an essential part of Emile's preparation as an ideal, reflective citizen. Thus, Rousseau's curriculum includes a reading of history as well as *Robinson Crusoe*—'the one book that will teach him to read all others'. John Stuart Mill too emphasizes the role of education in a democracy, seeing it not only as a guarantor of 'progress', but also as a necessary check against the tyranny of the majority. These concerns led Mill to advocate multiple votes for the educated and the complete exclusion of the illiterate from the political process (1991: 174-175). John Dewey, a figure whose work is considered canonical in this debate, accepts that education can take place through experience outside a formal environment but also affirms that formal education is necessary 'in a complex society' or 'as civilization advances' (Dewey 2004: 6-8).

The multiculturalism debate, fueled by prominent legal cases like *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), introduced many interesting questions to this debate, by asking whether parental rights supersede State rights in the matter of children's education; or whether an education that departs from core liberal values is even permissible. Theorists like Stephen Macedo (1995), Arneson and Shapiro (1996), and Eamonn Callan (1997) have tried to defend the necessity of a democratic education in a liberal democracy against the civic minimalists' calls for a greater space for the transmission of values that clash with those of the liberal state.

Finally, and of particular interest to my project, the deliberative turn generated its own perspectives on the role of education in a democracy. Such a conception requires citizens to arrive at political decisions through a process of reasoning, in which they are equally situated, informed, and demonstrate reciprocity (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996). Habermas has argued that the public sphere is necessary for the sustenance of deliberative democracy. He claims that such a sphere would not be possible without literacy.² Other deliberative democrats have emphasized the need for a democratic education that emphasizes the cultivation of skills, and character traits like critical thought and autonomy (Gutmann, 1987; Englund, 2000).

It is my contention that the above works entirely gloss over the question of the necessity of literacy for deliberative democracy, tacitly *assuming* it as a prerequisite for democracy, as can be seen in their emphasis on the need for a

² In an interview, Habermas stated, "A world without print—imagine it! The level of articulation and analysis would be left to drown. Print is necessary for maintaining the public sphere" (as cited in Navasky, 1995).

particular kind of education. Even where literacy is explicitly mentioned as a prerequisite, why such may be the case is left largely un-theorized.

1.2 Significance of the Gap

I do not believe that this gap is trivial, in so far as it has a great normative as well as conceptual significance when seen in the light of the existence of large illiterate populations in several democracies. While many of these are now pursuing aggressive literacy campaigns, this question is likely to remain because such campaigns are mostly targeted at enrolments in schools, while adult literacy has not been pursued as vigorously. Further, illiteracy is likely to persist in many societies in the near future, despite present signs of decline.

The inability of ordinary citizens to inform themselves is often emphasized by realist critics as a factor undermining the normative implications of deliberative democracy (Schumpeter, 1942; Posner, 2004). While one may today find it impossible to find the kind of exclusionist suggestions that Mill proffered, some versions of the realist critique might suggest that the deliberative approach cannot work in semi-literate societies. It might be argued that deliberation and decision-making must be concentrated on the elite until literacy—or an even more stringent requirement for education—is sufficiently attained. Thus, a defence of deliberative democracy's normative implications requires that we demonstrate how illiterate citizens could become politically informed.

Further, the deliberative conception is not only normative, but also a conceptual framework for understanding democracy. It is argued that when understood properly, democracy is quintessentially a deliberative exercise. Thus, the question of whether literacy is necessary for participation in a deliberative democracy is a question about whether a society with a large illiterate population is truly democratic, from a deliberative perspective.

1.3 Explaining the Gap

The complete absence of any theoretical work that questions the necessity of literacy for a democracy is puzzling once we notice the abundance of literature examining the notions of ideal citizens and democratic education. In this context, it is productive to examine the debate on ideal versus non-ideal theory, which has lately occupied political philosophers. Some have argued that the primary task of the political philosopher is not the normative one of discovering what we should do but the *evaluative* work of discovering what we should *think*³ (Cohen, 2003;

³ See Valentini, 2012: 657.

Mason, 2004). While some others have taken the contrary view that political philosophy is inherently normative, Adam Swift (2008) offers a more conciliatory approach, where he distinguishes between the epistemological and practical aims of political philosophy—or between political philosophy that seeks to track truths about justice (or other concepts like democracy)—and that which attempts to explain what we ought to do in its pursuit.⁴ While acknowledging that the claim of practical political philosophy being more important might be correct, Swift nevertheless admits that this does not, in turn, qualify as a claim about what the *proper purpose* of political philosophy is, as both have their respective places in the discipline of political philosophy.

For now, let us accept the argument that political philosophy may have a purely epistemological role. Surely, ideal theory is one aspect of such a task. In order to clarify a concept and its boundaries even roughly, one would need to look to the other side of the continuum that frames it, comprising the least ideal, or the basic minimum of that concept. And yet, it seems that a large part of the debate—or at least some of the most prominent debates on the concept of democracy and its relationship with education—have been exercises in ideal theory, neglecting almost completely the other end of this epistemological enterprise.

What about the role of ideal theory in normative guidance? The prescription that we ought to move towards universal, or at least greater literacy, seems trivial. One does not need the ideal of democratic education to suggest that it is better to strive for greater, equal literacy levels, rather than low or unequal ones. As of now, I wish to suggest that there is an important normative question in this debate that cannot be framed as being about transitional steps towards the end-state of the ideal: *What should we do once we accept widespread literacy as a given, at least for the present, though the ideal is that of a democratic education?* In other words, how can a democracy circumvent possible problems arising from an illiterate citizenry? The ideal is too distant to provide any meaningful assistance here.

This section can be concluded by suggesting that one ought to consider this large and significant void against the background of Charles Mills's claim (2005) that ideal theory is ideologically charged. Perhaps what is ideologically charged is not ideal theory *per se*, but the overwhelming focus on the former as a method of

⁴ Swift acknowledges that that this distinction is hazy, since all of political philosophy deals with truths that bear on actions. I believe this view is correct since the relationship between the normative and the conceptual is more of synthesis than of dichotomy.

conceptual clarification and normative guidance while neglecting the clarification of basic minimums, as well as normative guidance in situations like the ones presented above. Given that the ideal sketched happens to be closer to the circumstances prevailing in western democracies, this void demands greater self-reflexivity about possible biases in contemporary political theory.

1.4 Filling the Gap: A Response and its Methods

I propose to fill this theoretical gap by arguing that literacy is not necessary for deliberative democracy. In the next section, I analyze what it means to be conceptually informed, drawing upon normative values seen as central to deliberative democracy. I then examine how illiterate citizens can become politically informed, explaining the role played by non-literary sources and informal conversation in the deliberative system. In making my argument, I often draw upon examples of India's democratic experience as it provides a good case of a country with a large illiterate population, and yet, having strong credentials as a democracy. There is also empirical evidence that illiteracy has not obstructed the deliberative decision-making capacity of the local governance units of rural India—the *panchayats* (Ban et al., 2012; Gupte and Bartlett, 2007). However, these works do not offer much insight into *how* deliberation is possible in a semi-literate society.

II) Literacy, Deliberative Democracy, and Being Politically Informed

2.1 Defining Literacy

My argument is premised on the understanding of 'literacy' as referring to the basic ability to read and write. Lately, more expansive notions of literacy have emerged under the branch of 'new literacy studies', which seek to examine what people can do with their ability to read and write. Despite these developments, I persist in drawing upon a more basic definition since the ability to read and write is ultimately assumed by even these complex definitions of literacy. Additionally, a vast majority of censuses and surveys, which seek to assess the levels of literacy in non-Western societies, also define 'literacy' in this way.

2.1 Deliberative Democracy and Political Information

Why might illiterate citizens not be able to become politically informed? Let us look at some claims about literacy and attempt to relate these to informed deliberation in a democracy.

Some scholars of literacy suggest that its rise and the attendant development of the print medium played an important role in the emergence of the public sphere, which in turn is central to information transmission in modern democracies. In a similar vein, others argue that literacy provides the dominant framework for information transmission in today's society. Thus, to be illiterate is to be excluded from the structures of information like schools, books, newspapers, journals, party manifestoes, and pamphlets.

Further, one might even contend that the information which is exchanged in print is more reliable: for instance, print is seen as endowing communication with a degree of permanence, thereby allowing it to be examined from a distance, and functioning as a more reliable method of exchanging information. Other sources, one might argue, are too vulnerable to manipulation.⁵

In order to examine whether these arguments are valid, let us first examine what kind of information is required by politically informed citizens.⁶

Fishkin argues that his deliberative poll represents the opinion that citizens would have if they were fully informed. The basis for his claim is that citizens are provided with, and helped to understand, substantive background information materials that form the basis for their discussions in the deliberative poll. As an illustration, let us say that the subject of the poll is whether to build more roads or create more parks, and the citizens participating in it arrive at an informed choice in favour of the latter. What happens then? For Fishkin, the results of the poll have a recommendatory value in the political process: political leaders are often present at the poll, and results are televised or widely circulated among decision-makers. It is here, I believe, that Fishkin's notion of what counts as 'political information' is incomplete, since it can only understand the informational

⁵ The formulation of these arguments does not affect my suggestion that this question has not received adequate theoretical attention. These claims are drawn from the works on the consequences or nature of literacy, which consider its implications for democratic politics only fleetingly. The subsequent sections of this article bring these cursory considerations under the scanner and reveal their shortcomings. They attempt to demonstrate that such assumptions persist precisely *because* of the lack of theoretical attention.

⁶ In this project, I discuss whether illiterate citizens are able to acquire requisite information rather than whether they possess the ability for critical or abstract thought (see, however, Narasimhan, 2004 and Nandy, 1989: 1). These works have engaged with the latter question in a different context, denying the correlation between illiteracy and the ability or think critically and in abstract ways, by pointing out that complex practices like cricket, geometrical designs in crafts, and systems of folk dance have flourished in spite of illiteracy.

requirements of a mini-republic, and not of a deliberative system in the kind of *representative* democracies that we find today.

Citizens in a representative democracy must have adequate information about communicating their preferences to elected representatives, who can then make binding decisions. If they did not know how their political preferences were to be communicated to representatives in order to influence decision-making, they would have no motivation to engage in political deliberation. Further, if that were indeed the case, the deliberative outcome would be uninformed or even illegitimate, in that it would be unable to take cognizance of those preferences. Thus, citizens' need for information on how to express their preferences follows from the principle of responsiveness, central to democracy, according to which elected representatives must be in some sense responsive to public opinion.⁷ What information this requires citizens to have, more precisely, is determined contextually by factors like the political system, and the nature of those preferences. Broadly, however, one could suggest that it requires that citizens have *political* information—for instance, about the stand of various political agents, as well as *procedural* information such as how to vote, or what other methods exist to express one's preferences.

Being politically informed, according to Lupia and McCubbins (1998), is a matter of being able to use informational shortcuts or heuristics to realize one's political ends. They argue that learning is active and goal-oriented. It is rational for persons to attend to some information only when doing so leads to knowledge (or the ability to make predictions about one's choice) in ways that helps persons maximize their welfare, or realize their preferences.⁸ They conclude that we are able to make such predictions even in the absence of complete information, and thus, informed political choice does not require knowledge of detailed political facts. The problem with such a view is that it takes the goal of welfare-maximization as fixed, rather than focussing on assessing whether citizens even possess enough information to modify such a goal if required. In particular, the principle of reciprocity—a central normative principle of the deliberative process—requires that we ought to revise our preferences in light of pressing circumstances of others. Reciprocity is necessary in order to keep the system running, by serving 'as the lubricant of effective communication'. But it is also

⁷ The notion of responsiveness here does not require that representatives be bound by those preferences. But they are required to engage with them, for instance, by attempting to justify departures from these to citizens. See Mansbridge (2006: 78-109). This also presupposes that citizens have been able to communicate their preferences in the first place.

⁸ They use the concepts of welfare maximization and satisfaction of preferences interchangeably.

good in itself and grounds the value of deliberation (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Mansbridge et al., 2012: 11). Thus, Lupia and McCubbins's conception of being politically informed ignores that citizens must have adequate information about others' interests, which is necessary for effectively judging when these necessitate a revision of one's preferences. This includes, for instance, information about the impact of a particular move on some section of citizens, or about prevailing circumstances of some citizens that require urgent redress.

Thus, it has been argued that being politically informed is a matter of having adequate information to communicate their political preferences to their representatives as well as revising those preferences where necessary. This is not intended as an exhaustive definition of what it means to be politically informed. It is beyond the purview of this paper to offer a complete catalogue of the kind of information required by citizens. By demonstrating how illiterate citizens can become politically informed in this sense, we can see how claims in favour of the literacy-deliberative democracy nexus are mostly based on implicit biases against non-Western experiences of the public sphere and the forms of political communication they involve. In the next section, I demonstrate how citizens may acquire information about how to convey their preferences to political representatives through non-literary sources of information, defending them against criticisms about their reliability. In the final section, I discuss the role of informal political conversation in acquiring information about others' interests.

III) The Role of Non-Literary Sources of Information

3.1 'Non-literary' Sources of Information

'Non-literary' sources of information are those which can be accessed by an illiterate person. These may be produced by literate agents, and may also be primarily accessed by other literate agents; but what matters is that unlike literary sources of information, they do not preclude access by illiterate persons. Non-literary sources include, but are not limited to, television, political speeches, radio, and so on.

Here, I defend the simple, but often overlooked suggestion that illiterate people are able to inform themselves about how to communicate their preferences to political representatives through non-literary sources of information. I examine the role of television news in India as a non-literary source of information. Television news has an important role to play in India because of the inaccessibility of the print media to its large illiterate population, and because illiteracy coupled with low Internet penetration means that the latter still plays only a marginal role in its politics.

3.2 Television as a Non-literary Source of Information in India

The past few years have seen an increasing attention to the news media and its role in deliberative democracy. Several studies have focused on the effects of this mediatized public sphere, often criticizing its deliberative quality (Habermas, 2006: 416; Pilon, 2009: 17; Steiner 2012: 167-182). While this is a significant issue, I am presently concerned with whether television news can help citizens become politically informed. In particular, I examine whether it can provide them with the information that they need for communicating their preferences to their representatives.

The most obvious way in which television news contributes to the transmission of information in a semi-literate society is by *updating* persons through conventional news production, which includes round-the-clock bulletins, reportage of immediately occurring events, and live broadcasts of significant political events like election campaigns, legislative affairs or political speeches. This allows citizens to obtain updated information required for participating in a representative democracy, as well as understanding the political climate and the functioning of the political system.

Second, television news can help transmit information by *educating* through bulletins, or documentaries covering past events or issues that bear on important contemporary political issues. While this role is defined by issues of current interest, it involves going beyond the information that is currently being produced, in order to bring to the public's attention that which is relevant to those affairs. For instance, during elections, Indian news channels broadcast short instructional videos on getting a voter card and using an electronic voting machine, and advertisements familiarizing voters with parties' political symbols.

Extending Sen's thesis about the culture of debate in India, Mehta characterizes Indian television as 'argumentative television' (2008: 38). He highlights how daily evening debates on live television news—involving spokespersons of various parties debating with news anchors, citizens and experts—have helped clarify for the electorate the major political parties' stand on a wide range of issues. Thus, a third way in which television news can contribute to information dissemination is by broadcasting debates. These debates may take various forms: politicians debating against other politicians and/or other experts on issues under consideration; answering questions of a studio audience or call-in viewers; or even panel discussions involving affected groups of citizens, politicians, and experts. Such debates can help in the dissemination of information by allowing participants—experts, citizens and politicians—to contest

information presented by the news media or other participants, and bring about greater clarity on the positions of major political players.

The significance of television news as a non-literary source of information can be understood once we locate it against the background of the significance of oral practices in transmitting knowledge. Television news is embedded in, and draws upon such practices, enabling the mass production of orally-transmitted information.

Disputing the assumption that literacy frames access to knowledge, Narsimhan argues that this does not hold true of India, which has largely been an oral society. Whether or not this point holds true of India, it speaks against perceiving literacy as the historical *a priori* within which information is accessed, while ignoring the role of orality in the transmission of information. The latter's significance in transmitting information is confirmed by Bayly (1996: i-ix), who examines the rapid dissemination of information in a semi-literate society like colonial India, and its role in the spreading of a popular nationalist movement. Remarking on the political situation in post-independence India, he notes that indigenous forms of social communication were deep and diffused throughout society. These included public debates—the new, televised variant of which we have discussed above—and also political satire, puppetry, handbills and speeches. In contemporary India, ‘mobile loudspeakers’, which are attached to cycle-rickshaws and play pre-recorded messages about parties’ manifestoes or voting venues during election campaigns, provide another example of the continuing significance of orality as it is co-opted by modern technologies.

I now turn to how television news serves to facilitate the dissemination of information in a fourth way—that is, by incorporating traditional, oral modes of communication, and allowing for these to be transmitted to the masses. Take, for instance, New Delhi Television Network's puppet show ‘Poll-Khol’ (Open Election), which caricatured important political figures, depicting satirical conversations between them. Once again, television news helps broadly clarify where different political agents stand on important issues (Mehta, 2008: 45).

A systemic approach to deliberation (Mansbridge et al., 2012) allows us to recognize the value of non-literary sources of information such as television news in a democracy. Such an approach seeks to assess ‘deliberative systems’ rather than the interrelated individual sites of deliberation that constitute such a system.

It does not require that every deliberative site demonstrate a common standard of exchange and engagement of arguments. Instead, it allows for some sites to perform low on such a standard, insofar as they continue to play an important role in facilitating the exchange of information that is necessary for citizens to be

politically informed. Through the case study of a semi-literate society such as India, my aim in this section has been to show that television news can do so, and has *done* so with a degree of success. It follows that one way of assessing the deliberative contribution of television news is by evaluating the degree to which it can perform this epistemic function. This is compatible with seeing deliberation as an important instrument for producing reliable information, and continuing to insist upon more and better deliberation in sites like television news.

3.3 The Problem of Selection, Exclusion and Manipulation

I now briefly engage with an objection that seems to undermine the role that I afford to non-literary sources of information in a deliberative system. It might be argued that structural and ideological biases influence the selection of information that is to be disseminated, or what counts as news. For instance, Parkinson argues that the structure of television news means that only news that is story-worthy reaches the screen. Or, it might be objected that the media or the literate elite possess disproportionate ability to manipulate the illiterate section of society. I shall now try to demonstrate how the threats that these objections pose to the informative role of non-literary sources like television can be decreased.

First, one can point to the plurality of non-literary sources as offering a very basic method of checks and balances upon each one. For instance, though some have either criticized the trend of ‘politicization’ of news by media houses—or their being sympathetic to some political parties—the fact that different organizations have different leanings, and are known to have these leanings, ensures a variety of perspectives. Similarly, Mansbridge et al. (2012) argue that partisan media might actually contribute to the deliberative process by bringing out ‘information that television stations or newspapers aiming at the middle of the road do not raise or address’.

Second, I wish to suggest that one’s personal experience also acts as important guard against complete misinformation. For instance, in its 2004 election campaign for the national elections, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in India launched a massive billion-rupee campaign, referred to as the ‘India Shining’ campaign. It used a series of visual aids and televised advertisements to impress the country’s development under the party’s tenure upon the people. However, the BJP failed to retain power in spite of the unprecedented magnitude of this campaign. Commentators have argued that its underlying message was rejected by the voters, who found it contrary to their own experience of governance under the BJP (“India Shining Campaign”, 2004).

Third, systems of checks and balances within the processes of sources like the media can guard against problems related to filtration, manipulation or

exclusion. For instance, politicians engaging in live televised debates can (and often do) criticize the apparently undue attention to some political issues and events, at the cost of the exclusion of more pressing ones. Similarly, call-in viewers can criticize the media's practices on live television. Organizational checks and balances are equally important. For instance, the Press Council of India, composed of government-appointed officers (mostly retired judges), media persons and ordinary citizens, plays an important role in passing resolutions and ensuring self-criticism by the media. However, such decisions ought to be given publicity through the television itself, by broadcasting its discussions and resolutions, for instance.

Finally, against the concern of exclusion, one can turn to the role of the counter-public spheres, which are produced by groups marginalized within a hegemonic public sphere. Within such spheres, excluded sections are able to 'speak in one's own voice', by constructing and expressing their cultural identity 'through their own idiom and style' (Fraser, 1992: 126). Maxine Loynd (2008) traces the rise of the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP), a party formed largely by, and for the emancipation of, India's Scheduled Castes (many of whom identify themselves as 'Dalits'). Disproportionately high rates of illiteracy and poverty, and the absence of Dalits in India's media community, meant that the community and its politics were largely excluded from mainstream Indian print and television media. Loynd highlights how the B.S.P. formed a counter-public sphere using non-literary sources by utilizing the services of writers, playwrights, poets, artists and so on, whose job was to produce works creating Dalit consciousness, and transmitting the party's message to villages through oral and cultural performances. Apart from these indigenous modes of communication, its extensive network of activists and party workers also helped in the transmission of information through face-to-face oral communication.

To conclude our analysis of the role of non-literary sources of information, I wish to reiterate two points of importance: first, the purported link between print and the public sphere ignores the role played by non-literary sources of information in semi-literate democracies; and second, that the deliberative democrat's focus on the deliberative quality as the exclusive marker of deliberative contribution of non-literary sources (like television news) tends to overlook their significant informational role.

IV) The Role of Informal Political Conversation

This section will briefly examine the role of informal political talk between persons as a means for the exchange of information about each other's interests. Such a talk can be characterized as 'nonpurposive, casual, and spontaneous' (Kim

and Kim, 2008: 53), and it differs from non-literary sources like television news in the sense that the former involves interlocutors—as opposed to audiences—who are the beneficiaries of its epistemic contribution. It is a particularly important source of information since it gives a central role to persons who have epistemic privilege with regard to their own interests, as opposed to mediating sources. It can help illiterate citizens acquire information about others' interests. Despite its valuable nature, there is regrettably very little empirical work on the content of such conversation.

4.1 Political Talk: Rethinking 'Talk' and Exploring its Informational Role

Mansbridge (1999) has argued that informal political talk should be subject to the same normative constraints—reciprocity, publicity, and non-tyranny—that guide deliberation. With the exception of the notion of reciprocity, Conover and Searing's (2005: 278) empirical evaluation of everyday political talk along these parameters concludes that “the everyday talk of ordinary citizens falls short of deliberative ideals”.

How do we approach political talk that does not meet Mansbridge's normative constraints? Take, for instance, a chat between two women about their husbands' abusive behaviour. To use Mansbridge's terms, this is a 'recognizably political' conversation, since it concerns an issue that ought to be discussed. But such talk may be, like a conversation between Barber's (1984: 184) neighbours across a fence, one with 'no arguments, no challenges, no setting of priorities, no staking out of positions, no inventorying of interests'. Conover and Stearing's attempt to assess the publicity of informal political talk had focused on whether 'citizens offer public reasons for their preferences'. However, it seems like a category-error of sorts to examine whether the chat between these two women involves public reasons for their preferences, given that no reasons have been offered in the first place.

How does such talk, informal, and not necessarily argumentative, help us in acquiring information about others' interests? First, it allows for individuals who are ordinarily not a subject of political discourse (either because they are thought of as inappropriate, or too trivial) to be talked about. As an illustration, women who find it difficult to discuss birth control in public are able to share concerns on the subject in their daily interaction with others. In doing so, those women who do not face such problems can come to understand that this is an area of great significance for several other women. Secondly, through informal political conversation, one can come to know more about actors who are excluded from the political process or the media, due to various reasons such as numerical weakness or lack of effective political organization. Also, such conversation allows for the

spread of information transmitted through non-literary sources beyond those who have access to such sources. Thus, though a large number of illiterate persons are unable to access television directly due to poverty, the information transmitted across television news is discussed and further disseminated through word of mouth. Finally, several analysts studying the political processes in rural India have noted the persistence of strong hierarchies in rural politics, and the patron–client relationships that operate within these. This means that it is not always possible for ordinary and weaker sections of the population to publicly voice concerns that are critical of the dominant class. Informal conversations provide for an effective way to relay information about the negative impact of the elites on one’s circumstances and interests in a way that would not be possible in public for fear of adverse consequences. As another example, one can turn to the role of such political conversation during the tenure of Indira Gandhi, the Indian Prime Minister who introduced censorship of the press for the first time in the nation’s history. These ‘political rumors’—to use Gandhi’s term—proliferated despite the State control of non-literary sources of information like the radio and television, and eventually played an important role in her defeat in the elections (Tully, 2006: 287).

4.2 The Problems of Motivation and Manipulation

Chambers (2012) argues that deliberation must be practical—in the sense of being aimed at a binding decision—in order for citizens to invest cognitively into the process. Even when such a deliberation does not take place between persons authorized to take a binding decision, it must be at least be motivated by a concern about *what to do* about a subject that affects them. On the face of it, it seems that this would exclude everyday interaction, since it is too far removed from decision-making, and thus, often not motivated by practical reasons of the kind that Chambers stipulates.

I believe that the motivation problem does not pose a problem for the deliberative contribution of everyday interaction. Such a suggestion fails to take cognizance of the fact that people are motivated to participate in exchanges with others beyond practical goals: out of curiosity, courtesy, or other purely social purposes. Further, the informational role of everyday conversation is, in fact, made possible by its distance from decision-making. The informal, non-competitive environment offered by informal interaction helps for a disputation of facts to take place in circumstances where citizens are not under pressure to continue to hold their ground for fear of embarrassment even in situations where they realize they are incorrect.

One might also object that informal political conversation may be too susceptible to manipulation. In the previous section, I discussed how the threat of manipulation may be curbed by checks provided by other non-literary sources, personal experience, and institutional mechanisms. Of course, it does not seem appropriate to institutionalize mechanisms for self-regulation of informal interactions, but we ought to recognize that much of such conversation takes place between persons who know and interact with each other, often intimately, on a regular basis. The possibility of verification from other sources—non-literary, personal, or conversation with others—coupled with the threat of damage to one's reputation as a cost of misinformation, can once again help to soften this threat. I will have more to say about the fear of manipulation below.

V) Conclusion: A Response to Assumptions of Literacy as a Prerequisite

In the second section, I listed arguments that might be offered against the ability of illiterate citizens to become adequately informed for meaningful participation in the deliberative process. I hope to have demonstrated through the last two sections why such reasons are misplaced.

One possible argument, which was laid out, was that literacy provided the dominant framework within which information is accessed. I have aimed to show how such a claim ignores the significance of orality in the production and consumption of information in non-Western democracies. It neglects the role of non-literary sources of information and informal political conversation in helping illiterate citizens become politically informed. If it were to be demonstrated that either literate citizens of semi-literate societies, or those in high literacy democracies, depend similarly on such sources for the acquisition of political information, this would not affect my claim. The point, as I have previously stated, is merely to demonstrate how illiterate citizens can become politically informed.

A second possible argument had stated that literacy was necessary for reliable information. This claim suggests that information derived from other sources is too unreliable, and thus, that illiterate citizens could be manipulated. First, I have aimed to show how non-literary, as well as literary sources of information, can be subject to a wide range of internal as well as external checks that check the threat of manipulation. Second, it is not clear why such an objection may not apply to the printed word, which is equally vulnerable to manipulation by vested interests of the print media. A case in point is the phenomenon of 'paid news', that has generated much controversy in the Indian newspaper industry. Also, as Gupta (2012: 191-236) argues, it is not clear why the

printed word should occupy any claim to greater reliability. In fact, since it is open to interpretation and therefore distortion, the possibility of misinformation might be greater. On the other hand, the presence of the speaker in oral communication allows for interrogation and clarifications to be obtained *then and there*. This is, in fact, the underlying notion behind the epistemological priority of oral over written transmission of religious teachings from the teacher to the pupil in the Islamic tradition. A similar belief underpins Socrates' insistence on the spoken word as a better transmitter of information than the written word. It is not clear why print, as a technology of communication, is by itself epistemologically superior to other technologies, such as orality.

Finally, I wish to conclude my response to assumptions about the literacy–political deliberation nexus by urging that the ‘literacy is a prerequisite for deliberative democracy’ claim ignores the fact that political deliberation *itself* is an important means for becoming politically informed. To cite an example, Fishkin and Luskin (2005) demonstrate that citizens exhibit higher levels of information about political institutions and systems after their participation in the deliberative poll. Similarly, they are also shown to have higher levels of information about others' interests, which need to be factored into their deliberation. In that case, illiterate citizens have a further avenue for becoming politically informed— an avenue supplemented by non-literary sources and informal conversation with others.

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