Prospects

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Media Roles under Challenge

We have outlined the underlying normative principles by which the media's contribution to the democratic political process has typically been judged. We have also tried to describe the various journalistic roles that the media themselves choose to play in society, in varying degrees and with varying consequences. Although the so-called free media choose their own actions in these matters, their freedom is circumscribed. Many constraints and inducements affect them—social, political, and financial. The more extensive and potentially influential the media are, the more likely is pressure to conform to the wishes of others, despite nominal or last-resort independence. The media are too locked in to the affairs of the wider society to ignore the pressing expectations they are exposed to, quite apart from the requirements of their own audiences. On the other hand, even the freest media are bound by their internal values and thus follow a certain normative line. Therefore, it is a libertarian illusion to assume that some media are free while others are unfree; they are all extensions of social forces of some kind. Accordingly, media freedom should not be seen as an isolated concept but as inseparable from its counterpart: responsibility, whether attributed or self-chosen.

Contemporary Critiques of Media Performance

Our story has spanned a period during which much has changed and continues to do so. A central aspect of change has been what was widely understood fifty years ago as the press becoming the contemporary mass media or news media, with television still playing a central role but increasingly challenged by new media forms. This reflects not only the transformation of dominant technologies, from printing to electronics, but also increased uncertainty about the very

identity of the press that gained its status in struggles for democracy over the last two hundred or more years. Forged in the primarily industrial world through the processes of democratization, liberalization, and social reform, the institution's central character has come into question. The press is caught between conflicting demands that it provide both more diversion and entertainment and more specific, detailed, and technical information, quite apart from the demands of the market for profit and from pressure groups' efforts to shape the news. One feature of the older press that remains largely unchanged is its centrality for political life. For this reason, we concentrate initially on the links between media and democratic politics, before considering wider issues.

Increasing expressions of gloom have been heard about the rather poor condition of democracy in many countries, especially in North America and Western Europe but also in Asia and elsewhere (Bennett 2003; Bogart 1995; Entman 1989; Fallows 1995; Patterson 1994). The manifestation of problems has been seen in low or declining voter turnout in elections, lack of interest and participation, and increased apathy and disenchantment about politics in general among citizens. There is a widespread impression that the quality of civic life and citizenship is on the decline. Along with minimal turnout and interest, low or falling average levels of political knowledge are reported. There is some evidence of declining trust in politicians and in established political institutions in several major democracies.

Contributing to the alleged malaise of democratic politics has been the behavior of politicians, especially in the form of so-called modern or simply American campaigning methods (see Sussman and Galizio 2003; Swanson and Mancini 1996). Essentially the professionalization of political campaigns, these methods involve employing experts and the extensive application of commercial advertising and marketing strategies as campaigning practices. The newer methods of campaigning also require the tracking, controlling, and flattering of opinion. None of these methods is entirely new, but they have been adopted more widely and without question, without attention to the possible side effects. One such serious effect is increased cynicism and distrust on the part of the electorate, who are treated as targets for selling some candidate or policy or spectators to be diverted by spectacle, rather than as thinking and involved citizens.

More recently, world events have added a new dimension to the difficulties facing the news media in carrying out their democratic role, especially in a number of countries affected. Governments' fixation on the dangers of terrorism in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, has encouraged the view that the news media can and should be co-opted into the fight or defense against terrorism. This trend has been accentuated by the military actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have tended to make media cooperation with government agencies an issue of patriotism, often with approval from public

opinion. The consequences have been a narrowing of the interpretive frames of key events and a diminished range of sources of news, and some real reductions in freedom of information and protections for journalists. The independence of journalism from centers of power has to some extent been compromised.

The "decline of democracy" thesis has also been rather closely connected with a long-running and now accelerating critique of the media, as if the media were primarily responsible for the public's apparent loss of interest and trust in established institutions. Blumler and Gurevitch, for instance, have summed up the argument in their *Crisis of Public Communication* (1995; see also Blumler and Kavanagh 1999). The concept of "video-malaise" was floated in Germany as a consequence of the arrival of commercial television (Schulz 1998), with television entertainment being blamed for diverting citizens from their civic duties. The main points of the critique and the perceived connection between low media performance and political decline include:

- Commercial pressures and incentives are lowering standards of journalism all around and especially drawing resources and attention away from unprofitable types of news, a category that typically includes a strong component of political background information as well as international news. Such journalism does not usually attract large audiences but is widely seen as essential to political life.
- The result is to devalue political content, by giving it less attention or treating it less seriously and concentrating on human interest, scandal, and sensation. The general trend has typically been called "tabloidization," referring to the stereotype of this news format as populist, superficial, and sensational.
- Political news coverage tends to frame politics in terms of contests, games, or personal conflicts, neglecting the substance of debate and the content of issues. This horse-race or "strategic" coverage leads to ignorance and cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997).
- Deregulation and, in Europe, the decline of public service broadcasting have weakened the media that are dedicated to maintaining broad coverage of public and political issues relevant to the whole society. The resulting deficiency has not been made up by the flood of new, more commercial channels.
- A somewhat dated argument is still heard that television in particular is both a visual medium that conveys little hard information and a domestic and privatizing medium that encourages passivity and individual isolation rather than public participation (Putnam 2000).
- In general, the media are more and more devoted to promoting individual consumerism and increasingly neglect larger social concerns.

It is noticeable that in the long tradition of critical attention to the mass media, the ground of attack has shifted, and there is much less emphasis on the media's bias, hidden ideology, or hegemonic influence. The media are viewed

now as rather absent of political or social commitment (although still open to co-option by official sources) and thus leading to citizen disengagement rather than acting as deliberate agents of manipulation or control.

Alternative Perspectives on Changing Media and Politics

The plausible argument logically linking two apparently secular trends (decline of politics and decline of media quality) is less convincing when looked at closely, and neither trend is firmly established (see Norris 2001 for an entirely different view). In the case of politics, the empirical evidence of citizen detachment varies from place to place, and the supposed decline of democracy is rarely given a time-scale or indication of pace. The appropriate standard for news in a healthy democracy is rarely specified. We can observe both a rise and fall in the quality of overall media performance and cannot rule out the possibility that new situations may have a politically energizing effect, quite apart from the unexploited potential of new media.

Even if traditional organized party politics is declining in popular favor or failing to engage it, other parallel developments tell a different story. An expansion of extrainstitutional politics is evident, as well as an emergence of new social movements associated with single issues or large causes like the environment, feminism, antiwar, and antiglobalization movements, or mobilization against immigration. The new movements may not all be in tune with traditional democratic principles of reason and justice, but they nevertheless indicate active political involvement. Observers have noted an increasing privatization and individuation of politics, with attention to issues of consumerism and lifestyle. People are mobilizing around questions that seem to have more direct bearing on their lives. These trends pose new challenges for political institutions (see Dahlgren and Gurevitch 2005).

Lance Bennett (2003) suggests that the negative assessment of trends in political engagement may stem from a commitment to an older tradition of modernist thinking. According to postmodern perceptions, new forms of public identity and civic life are emerging. These newer forms of civic engagement are more closely linked to personal lifestyles. The popularizing trend of contemporary mass media can be seen as reflecting the "new politics" and also a decline in the traditional male domination of the journalistic world. The press has in some respects become more gender inclusive as it seeks to redefine its traditional role, and women are occupying a larger share of the professional pool.

The criticisms of the mainstream news media noted above cannot all be dismissed. But complaints of lower standards do not usually go far below the surface and are rooted in rather unbending norms of a serious journalism more suited to the needs of the political elite than the mass electorate. New styles and

formats for presenting reality may attract the denigratory labels "infotainment" and "tabloidization," without serious attempts to differentiate among many different cases and subgenres or to weigh the benefits of engaging audiences against the seeming lack of substance or sophistication. Popular journalism and infotainment may be necessary conditions for effectively involving nonelites. Political communication should include a place for the personal and emotional concerns of the private sphere.

The critique of news media declining in their political role tends to be directed at the traditional flagships of journalistic authority, especially the prestigious national press and certain periodicals, and the main public service or network news channels that typically serve the political elite. Critics make little attempt to take account of the total volume and diversity of sources of political information now available. It is possible that the critique reflects more of what Manheim (2007) calls the mythology rather than the reality of journalism. There is evidently considerable room for alternative norms of adequacy, and it is clear that the quality of democracy depends on the contribution of several different partners besides the media—citizens, businesses, politicians, and governmental actors generally.

With these remarks about what is essentially a change in the cultures of society and media, we are challenging the traditional normative standards for journalism that usually embody some version of what Zaller (2003; and see chapter 5 here) has called the "full news standard." By the same token, we call into question the expectations that legitimate the news media roles we have outlined. Why should the press have obligations to report systematically on events and circumstances as selected by political institutions, when there is no objective measure of what is more or less significant? Why should reporters cooperate with authorities or serve community purposes beyond what is necessary or in their self-interest? Why should it be their task to uncover or criticize abuse? There is no longer any authoritative answer to such questions and no basis for a coherent response that is in tune with the current trends underway.

The Wider Critique

The contemporary critical attention to the role of the news media in the democratic political process comes on the tail of a wider debate about media quality that has accompanied the development of the modern media and has not yet been resolved or superseded. The many failings of the media in relation to democracy have underlying causes that are hardly new. These include the ever-increasing scale of media operations, their global ownership and control, higher degrees of concentration and cross-ownership, and the pressures resulting from the commercialization of journalistic objectives. Each trend reduces

the likelihood that any media organization will meet its potential obligations to society, which are in any case increasingly denied or disregarded as irrelevant and unprofitable. Between them, contemporary tendencies work toward a concentration of communicative power in a few hands nationally and globally. They place the goals of profit before other purposes and subordinate standards of professionalism to the same criteria.

The consequences are highly selective information and systematically biased opinion. The media's concentration opens them to greater penetration by sources with economic or political power. Business connections with other economic branches are strengthened, reducing still further the media's independence. Accountability to shareholders and owners takes precedence over professional accountability and public responsibility. As the new media develop and become popular, they are drawn into the same nexus of control and priorities. Although there are undoubtedly many more voices and channels broadcasting views and news than before, their direct reach is generally limited and highly fragmented. Many commentators have drawn attention to the increasing possibility of the communications media, especially in their digital electronic forms, providing the means of centralized surveillance of nearly everyone on behalf of agencies ostensibly set up to protect society from its enemies. Our acts of communication, like our acts of consumption, are likely to be monitored or logged in computer records, as well as by concealed cameras in public places. As our possibilities for communicating and receiving communication have increased, so have the possibilities for others to know how we use our freedom in this respect.

None of this is particularly new as critique, but it is made more serious in its consequences by the centrality of large-scale media in an "information society" in which the control and flow of public knowledge is a key resource. The concern is also accentuated by the almost total neglect of initiatives for reform on behalf of the public interest, whether by governments or by media institutions themselves. In the Western world, there is little serious challenge to the view that the media are primarily a business and that the freedom of the media is the freedom to trade. Media regulation and policy are now largely devoted to promoting the technological and commercial development of media business opportunities, treating the opening of yet more hardware and software markets as an end in itself. Measures to limit these trends described are widely regarded as interference with the sacred principles of free markets. Instead politicians use the media for their own purposes—partisan, propagandist, and manipulative, often more disinformational than informational—seeking to avoid rather than welcome open-ended public debate in such forums that still exist for this purpose.

Changes Affecting the Old Media

The traditional media are themselves undergoing significant changes. Some of these changes reflect innovations in communication technology. The operating environments of older media are being changed by the arrival of genuinely new media, such as the Internet and mobile communication, and by the new market conditions that are resulting. The newspaper press has been the main traditional channel of political communication in the past, whether by voluntarily adopting a partisan political role or by giving priority to its role as a neutral carrier of views and information to the wider public. After a long period of maturity and relative stability, the press is being obliged to adapt to new circumstances. This shows up in several ways, including the continued trend toward concentration of ownership and a frantic search for new audiences and new formulas and forms. In many countries, too many publications are competing for an advertising and reader market that is stable or falling. Newspapers fear, with some justification, a declining and aging audience and intensifying competition from other more attractive media.

They also fear the loss of certain profitable forms of advertising, such as for jobs, travel, houses, and other personal goods and services, to the Internet. One form of adaptation is for large newspaper firms to enter into the new media as owners or content providers, thus hedging investment bets by making the new media into extensions of the old (see Boczkowski 2002; van der Wurff 2005). Computers and digitalization have connected the print media much more closely with other media platforms, making them less distinctive and in some respects less independent. Fortunati (2005) has described a process of the Internet's "mediatization," as the mass media extend into the new forms of distribution, coupled with an "Internetization" of the mass media, as they adapt to new challenges and a new operating environment. It is not yet clear that newspapers have changed very significantly or that the Internet has established itself as a major alternative news supplier (see below). In this process of convergence—which is also one of new media emergence—there is a possibility that the journalism profession is being weakened by the loss of their professional monopoly as gatekeepers of the public flow of information and their exclusive claim to be the chief information professionals.

The process of adaptation to a changed media situation and new social trends is making the traditional newspaper into more of an entertainment-oriented and visually attractive medium, appealing to popular taste, to young readers, and to what it perceives as of interest to women. All this is enough on its own to explain the widely observed phenomenon of tabloidization. Whatever the explanation, the newspaper can no longer be relied on to provide the traditional automatic service to the democratic political process, either because it cannot or

because it no longer sees this as a profitable path. There is very little obligation or incentive to constrain the press to meet such unwritten social obligations, aside from the pressures to be patriotic when national security is at stake.

Television has been undergoing similar changes, a trend especially noticeable in Europe, after decades of democratic political control and subjection to assigned social and political roles. Television has also lost some of its actual or perceived influence as the single most authenticated and widely consulted source of information about politics for most ordinary citizens. The newer technologies of distribution by cable and satellite that sparked a process of deregulation and competitive expansion in the 1980s, accompanied by a relative decline of public service broadcasting, have resulted in the change in television's position. In many countries, several, even many, commercial television channels have arrived, competing for the same general television audience. In addition, a few special interest channels have entered the scene, some of them transnational, although there is little new provision specifically dedicated to politics.

What we call television is also changing because of new means of delivery and digitalization that accelerate the process of channel proliferation and possibly diversification. While technology is an obvious cause, there are certainly other contributory factors to be found in the social and cultural trends of our time. An important aspect of change has been the gradual decline or even disappearance of the mass audience, typical of the 1970s and 1980s, when over-the-air television could no longer deliver a majority of the population for its popular transmissions or even for the regular main evening news bulletin (Webster and Phelan 1997). This fragmentation of total viewing across multiple channels has been accompanied by planned segmentation designed to match these channels with income and lifestyle segments of the consumer market. Arguably, the political role of television has been downgraded, in relative terms at least, especially in circumstances where it cannot be used for political advertising as in most of Europe.

Despite the continuation of certain regulatory controls and pressures to secure an adequate and diverse supply of news and information—controls that are gradually weakening in their effect—television has generally become even more entertainment-oriented and populist in its program policies than it used to be. Television now finds it hard to effectively deliver on its voluntary or involuntary commitments to serve the political process with information and access for politics at time slots that will reach large audiences. Political information in its traditional forms is becoming more marginalized, and the service consciously rendered to democracy is being given a lower priority than success in the market place.

Despite the radically increased range of transmission of television and the existence of some international channels, little has come of the large expecta-

tions of a global public for news and information. Many of the same barriers that apply to the printed press also apply to television when it comes to news and political opinion. There is no global democratic system to support demand.

The Potential of New Media

The perception that what are now called "new media" can be an aid to democracy dates back to the late 1960s, when the potential of the emerging electronic communication technology to subvert the dominant forces of society was first recognized. The inspiration was mainly derived from radical and libertarian movements of the 1960s but was coupled also with ideas about the grass roots, community, and democracy (Enzensberger 1970). There was a flowering of an underground press in these years (especially in the U.S.), and micromedia were making their appearance in developing countries and countries enduring dictatorial rule (Downing 2001). There was much praise for the achievements of the samizdat press in the Soviet Union. The relevant "technologies of liberation" included local radio, community television by cable, transistor radios, cassette recorders, mobile printing presses, Xerox machines, and personal or low-tech television cameras. Only later, during the early 1980s, did the relevant technologies come to include computer-based communication possibilities and even the telephone. The emerging new media, in their political dimension, were seen as connected with alternative and counterculture politics rather than with mainstream democracy.

The more recent (post-1990) phase of new media thinking has emphasized the potential for the media to revive mainstream democratic national or society-wide politics. Theorizing has tended to be somewhat technocentric, in contrast to earlier, more society-derived theory. Even so, this division remains, with one school of thought extrapolating benefits to politics as an effect of technology and another looking to technology to facilitate the democratic process, especially by way of wider and deeper involvement. As time has gone by, experience and research evidence have combined to dim technocratic hopes and reinstate the social-political perspective.

A number of possible benefits to the normal democratic political processes have been identified by several authors (e.g., Axford and Huggins 2001; Bentivegna 2002; Dahlgren 2005; Hacker and van Dijk 2000; Norris 2001). These benefits include more direct democracy by electronic polling; improved access for citizens to party leaders and candidates, with more interaction between them; greater capacity to mobilize and organize support and action. In addition, the new electronic media remove some barriers to publication and reduce the power of the mass media as gatekeepers. In general, we can expect a greater volume and diversity of politically relevant information to circulate.

Scattered evidence in support of some of these benefits has been found, although no real estimate can be made of any significant difference in political enlightenment or involvement in the political process. The findings now emerging from research into the use of the new media in politics generally sound a warning against high expectations of fundamental change in the overall situation. The reasons lie variously in the relative youth of the Internet and the resistance of existing institutions. In addition are some obstinate facts of social behavior, media structure, and media use habits that include the following:

- Access to the media, including new media, whether as sender or receiver remains very unequal and socially stratified. There are still many barriers to the easy use of new media.
- The salience of politics to new media users remains on the whole low, compared to the many competitors for attention that are better advertised and promoted. Making more political content readily available does not necessarily gain a wider audience.
- The new media offer many specialist opportunities to politicians and already active citizens, without enlarging the general appeal of politics. Those who are excluded or alienated by politics are no more easily reached than by traditional means.
- The new virtual communities made possible by the Internet are not reliable, trustworthy, or stable as social networks, often lacking the social cement and common interests of "real" groups.
- Already, multimedia businesses or governments are extending control over the gateways and uses of the Internet, neutralizing much of the hoped-for liberating potential.
- Established political parties and authorities are not strongly motivated to explore the truly new potential of the new media, except where it serves their own organizational purposes. There has been a tendency to use new media in old ways. Politics itself has generally become more institutionalized and closely managed from the center or top.

The arrival of new, online media has given rise to a number of new issues and new uncertainties about the proper conduct of those who seek to use them for communication in the public domain. Partly because of the essentially unregulated character of the Internet, as yet there are no or few ethical rules and guidelines to apply in cyberspace (but see Hamelink 2000). In the absence of any new legal framework, the existing laws concerning public communication also apply to the Internet, especially where harm to others or the state or property rights might be involved. Similarly, where the Internet is used for typical old media activities such as news journalism, we can expect the same professional norms and ethics to apply and for the same reasons. These reasons include the need to meet the criteria of quality and, in the case of news, to establish relations

of trust and credibility. Where market relationships are involved in Internet communication, there are also ethical guidelines for practice that cannot be evaded. Even so, there are quite a few gray areas where existing rules do not fit or do not really exist. The freedom claimed for the new online media is at the core of many difficulties. Ultimately freedom involves a denial of all accountability and a challenge to all constraints and obligations of morality, law, public opinion, and the public interest. This position can be and is being contested, especially on behalf of state security and law enforcement, though it can receive some support from the character of Internet technology itself.

Certainly, there is no sure ground for expecting only or even predominantly beneficial uses regarding the political process. The flow of political communication in cyberspace can be just as biased, manipulative, propagandist, disinformational, distorted, manipulative, cynical, and xenophobic as in the conventional channels of present-day mass media. Paradoxically, the very openness and lack of institutional control over the new media may negate the potential benefits. But this is not so paradoxical if one considers the history of the previous democratic channels of public communication: the press and broadcasting.

Indeed, one may ask whether the public and open nature of political life is better served by old than by new media. The former are currently more inclusive, and give visibility, structure, and consistency to currents of opinion and social action. Direct, tangible contact as well as institutional continuity are still needed, at least for the conduct of "old politics." Trust and loyalty between participants in political life require transparency and continuity if they are to develop, and new media tend to operate without transparency and in fleeting forms. However, this assessment does not take adequate account of the increasing sclerosis of politics and the various ills outlined earlier in this chapter. What remains untested is whether there is any new form of democratic politics that might develop intimate connections with the new technology. Such new forms have already been imagined, and proposed but it is hard to see how they could be generally adopted, and if not, they would not be democratic. No verdict is possible at this moment (see Bonham 2004).

In fact, no single outcome to the transformation of political communication is likely as a result of the new media. Lincoln Dahlberg (2001), for instance, has described three different visions or rhetorics concerning the impact of the Internet on democratic processes. The terms he uses echo differences in democratic theory that we have described earlier in this book (see chapter 4). He identifies, first, a rhetoric of "liberal individualism," according to which the new media free rational citizens from the constraints of party and ideology. Citizens can make their own choices in a large market of ideas and policies. Democratic processes such as voting can be carried out by way of the Internet. The tendency is likely to be toward majoritarian and plebiscitary decision making, but operating ac-

cording to market rules, with possibilities for diversity. The second rhetoric is that of communitarianism that celebrates the local, the social or cultural group, and the community. Networks are based on such categories rather than being commercial, governmental, or society-wide. Different ends and ways of doing things are likely to be promoted. Third, there is the rhetoric of deliberation, with the new media providing the basis for a virtual public sphere (Barber 1984) and with much greater emphasis on and possibility for extensive dialogue and debate. There is no reason to suppose that any one of these models will triumph. However, it is reasonable to expect, given the Internet's current direction, that liberal individualism will still be dominant and market relations will continue to influence political relations.

This variety of visions for the mediation of politics by the Internet reflects the diversity of what makes up the Internet and its many uses in different aspects of democratic political processes. Dahlgren has identified five distinct ways the Internet intervenes in the conduct of politics or affects its course. He describes these "different sectors of Net-based Public Spheres" as follows:

1. Versions of *e-government,* usually with a top-down character, where government representatives interact with citizens and where information about government administration and services is made available.
2. The *advocacy/activist* domain where discussion is framed by organizations with generally shared perspectives, values and goals—and geared for forms of political intervention.
3. The vast array of diverse *civic forums* where views are exchanged among citizens and deliberation can take place.
4. The prepolitical or *parapolitical* domain, which airs social and cultural topics having to do with common interests and/or collective identities.
5. The *journalism domain* which includes everything from major news organizations that have gone online to Net-based news organizations (usually without much or any original reporting) such as Yahoo! News, alternative news organizations such as Indymedia and Mediachannel, as well as one-person weblog sites. (2005, 153)

This classification reminds us that effects from the new media can flow in quite different streams, each with somewhat different consequences for, and various interactions with, established forms of political communication. It is clear from Dahlgren's list that the formulation of media roles cannot simply be transferred from the traditional press to new branches of the media. There are too many substantial differences of form, content, and purpose. The roles we have identified are still generally relevant to the enlarged journalism domain, but there are also new roles emerging, especially those relating to active participation, empowerment, and dialogue.

Lessons for and from Press Theory

The various media changes we have mentioned do appear to undermine the conventional basis of a unified democratic media institution—one that would be universally available and responsive to the citizens of a given national society, according to some more or less commonly accepted principles of operation and norms for conduct. Of significance is the diversification and individuation of media use and the escape of increasing sections of the public from exposure to a more or less common diet of political information and ideas. The new diversity is to be valued, but the loss of a shared public space must also be regretted.

As we noted at the outset of this book, the older institution of the press—essentially news and journalism—gradually acquired a set of customary rights and obligations, and even an element of de facto monopoly over the production and flow of information in the public sphere. It rested on a foundation of law and custom, with strong professional underpinnings. As a result of media industry changes, what was once understood as the press is simply one component of larger media industries—often multimedia conglomerates. Typically there is no clear organizational separation for the press, and it is subject to the same logics and pressures as other components of the media industry. The result of other changes that are mainly technological is to bring the press's identity and autonomy into question and introduce numerous ill-defined informational activities into its domain. The outcome is untidy and sometimes disturbing, but this is not in itself necessarily undemocratic. Perhaps even the reverse is true, since it also has the effect of weakening the grip of monopoly control of news, as well as control by professional newspeople. More is involved than a territorial dispute and control over the rules of the game. There is a new uncertainty about, and a fragmentation of, press roles as we have come to understand them.

Our account of different traditions of normative thinking about public communication has portrayed an expanding and diversifying set of ideas about the accounts of reality that lie at the core of journalistic practice. Our account also makes clear that, as observed in *Four Theories,* prescriptive theory always reflects the nature of the society and of the times. Our story begins with aspirations of reaching a high standard of truth, in its fullest and deepest sense. These were modified as libertarian, and then democratic, claims arose of an inalienable individual right to seek and determine a personal truth. In the last century, when journalism acquired its modern institutional form, embedded in media organizations with essential functions for the economy and government of industrial states, a kind of compromise was reached between absolutist truth claims and disorderly individual liberty. This compromise was encapsulated in rules for professional journalism that were mainly self-policed by the industry and journalists themselves, with variations according to national contexts. The

compromise was also shaped and sometimes guided on behalf of the society or state by guarantees of protection and some elements of regulation or control. A concept of public interest in the conduct of news media, for good or ill, gradually emerged, though in disparate forms. Service to the democratic political process was one of the principal legitimations for trying to protect a public interest, although there were other reasons.

The global post–World War II restoration of media systems in countries that had been occupied or defeated effectively linked a certain procedural model of democracy—largely based on the Anglo-Saxon example—with a particular model of good journalism. This settlement of the issues was not all that settled, although it has survived as a central reference point. To a certain extent, the account we have given of journalistic roles is largely in conformity with this model, although the edifice of journalistic-democratic symbiosis is less solid and enduring than it may seem. Some of the challenges to the model were relatively easy to dismiss, especially the unconvincing theory of an objective historical truth that Communist regimes deployed to justify the conflation of news with propaganda. Other objections, however, carried more weight. From the perspective of the developing world that was being encouraged to aspire to Western democracy, Western journalistic practice looked distinctly unimpressive when tested against its own truth claims. The omissions from and ethnocentricity of what passed for accounts of what was happening in the world were just too glaring.

From within Western democracies also came no shortage of criticism of the failings of supposedly objective news, whose narratives were systematically shaped by selective frames and implicit national or political ideologies. Journalistic reform movements emerged, beginning with the advocacy of a new journalism that would be personal, engaged, and subjective. Later they included programs for civic or public journalism that would serve the local community and foreground the interests of the audience. In our account of normative theory in chapter 3 we emphasized the rise of aspirations toward more participatory and activist forms of journalism that would promote positive goals as well as useful criticism, geared to the needs of groups or communities. These normative aspirations were sustained in part by new technologies of production and transmission that have continued their advance since the early days of cable. The challenges from these quarters were sometimes linked to a fundamental critique of industrial capitalist society and involved a rejection of the alleged centralism, elitism, and hegemonic tendency of metropolitan and international mainstream journalism.

The ground was thus well prepared theoretically for the arrival and adoption of the Internet and the World Wide Web as the medium par excellence for enriching citizenship and civic engagement. Communication could become more democratic by several clear criteria, with seemingly unlimited space and

access for expression, information, dialogue, and the propagation of new ideas and movements. However, it is not clear that the changes that are under way, or are considered possible, are based on any new journalistic norms. This is not surprising, given the lack of any directing hand or clear form of governance or even self-governance. The Internet has no obvious central purpose or definition as a medium within the spectrum of what is familiar. It simply develops in directions toward which its providers and users are inclined, driven by innovation and market opportunities. With increasing success, commercial pressures have also increased. Despite the lack of coherence and direction, a few principles affecting journalistic practice that the Internet has encouraged are to a limited extent an alternative to the mainstream model. They are also disparate and sometimes contradictory. They include: a highly relativistic notion of truth as expressed opinion loosely associated with a universe of certified facts uncovered by search engines; a principle of equality that equates all sources and views and recognizes no hierarchy among them; a high value placed on intimacy, subjectivity, and personal interaction; and considerable liberty of individual expression.

As is reflected in the typology of Internet-mediated content we have outlined, it is no longer feasible to propose the same prescriptive guidelines for all forms of journalism. This was always a rather doubtful project, by turn quixotic and imperialistic, designed to protect and advance journalism's mainstream institutional forms, often with the good intention of securing the news product's minimum quality. This is no longer realistic because of the increasingly successful incursions into the flow of information by other variants. It is also no longer in keeping with the media's changing structure. The main mass media of the latter twentieth century were mass newspapers or general television channels, both centered on the provision of hard news and deriving their identity in this way. The mass newspaper has been in a slow but steady decline for some time, although what looks like decline by a criterion of mass impact is partly a matter of transformation into a different kind of medium, in which breaking headline news is no longer the key feature. The typical television channel is no longer strongly anchored in a journalistic role, compared to its counterpart of twenty-five or more years ago, and its varied functions are now often dispersed.

Our own prescriptive approach to normative theory for the media should not unthinkingly adopt the values and standards of an earlier phase of press history, especially that which followed the *Four Theories* and midcentury modernity generally. This does not mean adopting a relativistic populism, but being sensitive to the diversity of expression and multiplicity of values in contemporary political realities. We should not treat the emerging new media, the Internet in particular, as a mass medium like press and broadcasting that plays much the same role, although it does share some of the same tasks and can accommodate

mass media functions along with many others. We need to indicate the ways in which the norms of democratic communication have implications for the Internet, for example, in matters of ethics, accountability, responsibility, and legitimate claims from the public.

In terms of normative theory itself, one of the significant issues at present is the changing conception of the public sphere. Normative theory has always been concerned with the ways freedom and equality can be reconciled with the effectiveness of collective decision making. Overall the main concern is with preventing autocrats and oligarchs from taking advantage of relative freedom and fluidity to dominate the space of public decisions. The trend in late modernity is toward an increasing concentration of socio-political-economic power at the level of the nation-state. The ordinary person becomes little more than a helpless spectator. The great social movements that have struggled with the concentrations of power at the national and transnational levels have largely been absorbed by the dominant political-economic logic. The appeal to the social responsibility of socioeconomic power blocs and to the values of professionalism has had limited success, especially in postcolonial societies built on a base of imperial exploitation. What is occurring is a redefinition of the concept of the public sphere from the nation or city to small, transient, nonprofessional "collective happenings." In the face of the large-scale strategies, people seize on those spaces of less intensive control to establish a new worldview and a new set of norms. Since most of the essentialist concepts of rights, legal defenses, religious idealism, and movement ideologies have been incorporated by the dominant political-economic concentrations of power, spontaneous small-scale confrontations appeal more to the constructions of meaning that are based on a personal sense of identity. Learning to deal with a multiplicity of cultural identities through dialogue to understand better one's own identity becomes a primary objective.

Normative theory continues to deal with the structuring of public communication in a way that enables people to participate in decision making. The theory presents reasoned explanations of why a public sphere should be structured in a particular way. If the task in liberal democracies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was to put national service structures into place to support personal moral responsibilities, today the public endeavor is to protect personal life space from domination by the same national service structures because they are now part of the dominant systems of power. If normative theory once dealt more exclusively with political economic systems, increasingly it is expressed in all areas that confront constraints on human existence.

The relevant issues for a normative theory of the media can be discussed at a number of other levels, as indicated for instance in figure 1 (see chapter 1). In particular, we can differentiate the level of a public philosophy for social communication with a universal reference from that of principles for national or international communication systems that indicate broad responsibilities of

the media in society, and from that of professional actors in a given terrain of media work. In our own treatment of the larger issue, we have generally opted for a philosophy of public communication that sees the mass media as having an essential part to play in larger social and cultural processes. We accept as legitimate the claim, at the level of a media system at least, that the news media have particular responsibilities to make public the concerns of society, as embodied in a variety of voices, ranging from those of individuals and social groups to governments. This does not mean that any particular media organization can properly be compelled to do what it does not choose to do, but it points the way for responsible actions that aim to achieve public goals consistent with both professional and business norms. At the level of media organization and professional practice, we identified four primary roles that lie at the heart of the necessary public tasks of the media in society, as we see them. Although much has changed and is changing in the activities and operating environment of the media, the essence of these roles endures. The essence of each provides a useful focus for assessing the impact of change and useful guidance in pursuing the larger normative goals we have identified.

Challenges Reviewed

A brief review of the contemporary challenges and opportunities arising in the pursuit of the four roles is in order. The monitorial role of journalism remains at the core of the task of informing the public and is not essentially changed by new circumstances. If anything, there is a greater need for information over a wider range of topics from more sectors of society, with more exacting criteria of informational value. The new online media have already made a quantitative contribution to the performance of this role by opening up much greater media capacity and a qualitative contribution by increasing the diversity of what is available and by expanding the interactive search capacity of information seekers. These media have reduced the de facto monopoly of the dominant media over the gatekeeping process, although these dominant media have also entered the field of online news provision and still dominate most of the news discovery that takes place. They have also become to some extent informal and unsystematic gatekeepers for alternative news sources, directing attention to websites and treating the Internet as a source, albeit a somewhat unreliable one.

On the deficit side, dominant sources and suppliers of information (especially governments but also various industry groups, professions, and lobbies) have mounted an accelerated, and perhaps more effective, effort to manage the monitorial process to their own advantage than had been possible in the past. Economic and organizational factors often lead the news media to accede to such well-organized pressures. The alternative route to monitoring by way of alternative media or the Internet tends to be marginalized or restricted by the

lack of resources and uncertainties about credibility, among other things. The gains made in media monitoring by additions to the media spectrum have to be balanced against the generally declining reach of traditional news media. More to the point of this discussion, however, are doubts about the quality of the new or alternative news sources. Despite many limitations in the quality of traditional news reporting and actual failures of performance, the truth claims that were made were usually open to challenge or confirmation according to some clear standards.

The facilitative role of journalism, in our account, has been associated largely with the encouragement of deliberative democracy at the grassroots level and with encouraging debate and circulation of ideas and information in the public arena. Almost certainly new media forms have reinvigorated the performance of this role, across the whole spectrum of public communication. However, as noted, there are alternative possibilities for the further development of the Internet, and it is not clear how much it will contribute in the longer term. Almost certainly, however, we should conclude that the facilitative role cannot be performed only by the new media. These media will only contribute to deliberation when they are interrelated with channels that both reach a larger public simultaneously and have also earned credibility by their independence and commitment to truth over a period of time.

The status of journalism's radical role can be assessed against much the same background and with many of the same conclusions. Independent criticism and comment matter more than ever on a wider range of issues that are becoming more complex to assess with any certainty, for instance in relation to the environment, biomedicine, and many social problems. The alleged "retreat from ideology," especially any belief system that challenges the social or economic order, has made it harder to mount a coordinated and coherent radical critique of the status quo on a broad front. The established mass media do not see a great deal of profit in criticism that goes beyond partisan position-taking and the perennial attraction of scandals and conflicts. The Internet and other personalized media are not really a substitute for significant representation of critical viewpoints in the media spectrum. The personal media are unsuitable because of their maverick character and inherent unreliability, not to mention their relative lack of reach to any large audience or political constituency. The result is, rather than a deepening critique, a fragmented and personalized pattern of critical ideas in circulation. The multiplication of media channels and segmentation of markets has supported the existence of what might be called critical subcultures, but this situation does not guarantee sustained and coherent critique. As always, however, major events, such as the invasion of Iraq and its consequences, do force certain issues onto the attention of a wider public and generate a society-wide debate.

The collaborative role of journalism remains very much in evidence, especially at times of crisis or disaster and with respect to the routine needs of political, social, and cultural institutions. Cooperation on many matters is supported by public opinion and thus by the publics of different media. It is often freely chosen by the media themselves, despite the ambivalence attached to the notion of a press that puts an overriding purpose for some particular information ahead of simply pursuing truth or serving the information needs of an audience. In the traditional notion of a free press, purpose is left to the original sources of news. Judgment and need are the domain of the receiver, and the media play a neutral role as messenger. The problems associated with this norm of collaboration are much the same as they ever were. They stem especially from the unequal relations of power between those typically seeking cooperation—state and military authority, government officials, powerful lobby groups—and the media and alternative voices seeking cooperation on issues whose coverage is not well funded or universally popular. In this equation, the audience is also subordinate, lacking the basis of information needed for questioning the message. The new media have neither added to nor taken much away from the practice of collaboration, either in terms of amount or value. Although the Internet has typically been identified with alternative voices and diversity, the medium is also very much at the service of propagandists. In fact, there is rather less constraint against illegitimate forms of collaboration than is to be found in mainstream media.

The main trends of contemporary society and industry are weighted toward stronger and less legitimate claims for collaboration that the media, for reasons of commercial self-interest, are less likely to resist than in the past. The demands made either explicitly or implicitly, whether by government or public opinion, commercial pressure or organizational necessity, to collaborate in the amorphous and unending war on terror are a primary cause of this role's distortion. The most visible recent manifestations of collaboration have been the subordination of journalism to military and political control, by way of correspondents being embedded in the armed forces. This has led to systematic distortion or omission of information about the course and consequences of warfare, compounding a failure to inquire deeply into warfare's causes in the first place (Kamilopour and Snow 2004; Sylvester and Huffman 2005). Each country has its own way of practicing and justifying collaboration in the name of security or patriotism, but the general outcome is to enfeeble any claim to monitoring reality on behalf of democratic process. Commercial pressures can also lead to collaboration in the form of self-censorship—as in the cases of both Rupert Murdoch's satellite television and Google's Internet services in relation to China—for reasons of expedience, given the enormous financial stakes. The nature of the pressures at work makes it unlikely that new media will aid signifi-

cantly in reaching the acceptable level of transparency that we have advocated (in chapter 9) for this role.

Conclusion

The quality of performance and of systems varies a good deal from place to place, despite superficially shared notions of the media's role in society. No general assessment is possible, since the roles we have highlighted have diverse forms and sometimes contradict each other. On many occasions, the traditional journalistic obligations we have outlined are still fulfilled conscientiously and well despite some reasons for pessimism that have been mentioned. But our tone has been more pessimistic than optimistic.

We recognize that the conditions the media operate in are becoming more and more restrictive and oppressive. This is especially true when it comes to the crucial issue of having a financially profitable media system that is both committed to public enlightenment and sufficiently independent and capable of holding agencies of power in society to account—economic, political, and military. Those at the heart of power do not have to answer to the media, and the media are usually reluctant to press the issue for fear of consequences or because they have close ties to the established order. Where some media appear to have an independent capacity to challenge the powerful, often too much is at risk and too many interconnections exist with outside interests to make challenges even likely. Where the media are vigilant and critical as well as independent, they are also likely to be marginal in the landscape of the big media, unknown to the potential public and easy for the powerful to ignore. It is unrealistic to expect media to operate as an effective and equal fourth estate unless this role is also strongly supported by others operating in the public sphere—democratic politicians, to say the least.

This view does not invalidate the many efforts that are possible to increase the autonomy and principled conduct of media professionals. But we suggest that it is time to take a wider view of the developing range of possibilities for public communication and of what is still referred to as the "new media." In considering the requirements of democracy and civil society, too much attention has probably been paid to the established, traditional media—a tendency of this book as well. The core of the traditional press, with its public and political tasks, is diminishing in significance, with smaller audiences and subordination to more profitable activities and less independence of voice. We may have to recognize that it is no longer adequate as the keeper of society's conscience, if it ever has been. There are no adequate institutional means available to the media for fulfilling this role, and both the moral claim and the political obligation to do so have been weakened.

We need, in any case, to widen our theorizing to encompass those activities that might have a better claim to fulfill this role, even if their means seem weaker. This means, first, paying more attention to the many means of public communication, often small media and other forms of communication that do not seek or claim any mass range or influence but at least escape the deadening grip of management for profit only. We refer not simply or even primarily to Internet-based communication sources, which are still subject to many limiting factors and are not yet guaranteed the freedom originally claimed for the Internet. We mean all forms of communication for social, cultural, and political purposes that are coming to occupy more of society's available communication space than before, leading us to such concepts as "mediascape" (Appadurai) and "media ecology" (Postman). These forms include the many technologies available for personal use, such as photography, recording, computers, mobile phones, as well as art and performance of all kinds, and demonstrations and staged events. In these alternative areas, we need to look for and apply guiding communication norms and values for the twenty-first century.

Second, and at the same time, our theorizing should pay more attention to the many extramedia activities of research, monitoring, reflection, and means of accountability that subject the media themselves to scrutiny, both according to diverse perspectives and in a transparent manner. Many such forms of activity exist in contemporary civil society, amounting to what could be (and has been) termed a "fifth estate" (Ramonet 2003)—to which this book can be considered one small contribution.

Our quest began with an account of *Four Theories of the Press* as a significant benchmark in a much longer history of reflection and theorizing about the proper conduct of journalism in contemporary democracies. Today's society has no reason to go back to that moment to rediscover lost tablets that would provide ethical guidelines for the present. The ensuing decades of experience with proliferating forms and endlessly expanding news media, not to mention the lessons of contemporary history, have generated many new and more relevant ideas about how journalism ought to operate in order to fulfill a diversity of political and social purposes. Many of these ideas have been contributed by journalists themselves and have received support from professional associations, as well as from an apparatus of research and scholarship in the academy; in this way, professional journalism and media scholarship together have provided a counterweight to external and industry pressures. In addition, they increasingly recognize the need for and legitimacy of mechanisms of social and personal accountability that can be applied beneficially to the news media.

We cannot adequately understand the restructured media forms that are emerging as a result of the ongoing technological revolution that began in the late twentieth century in terms of the perspectives that informed the work of Siebert

and his coauthors, even if many components of their thinking are still relevant when it comes to basic values. There have already been significant changes in the media and the context of their operation, with several consequences, including especially the impossibility of making an exclusive claim to a superior comprehensive vision for the media's role in society. There is no overarching criterion to be chosen above others, such as liberty, public service, participation, even truth itself. There is no longer a single shared tradition for handling these and related issues. Not least, the trend toward globalization has weakened the ties between a national society, its culture and polity, and its media.

Any normative framework for the analysis or guidance of the media that we might erect would have to take into account the great diversity of purposes and perspectives among the many actors in public communication, inevitably involving conflicts and inconsistencies. The fundamental normative issues of communication have not changed all that much, having to do with truth, purpose, effects (good or bad), and accountability. But the available normative codes for tackling them are changing and multiplying, in matters of morality, ethics, law, social theory, and professional practice, to name a few.

Despite the evident limitations of the tradition of press theorizing that we have explored, the enterprise still has value, and not simply a heuristic one. It serves as an accessible and orderly archive of ideas, principles, and examples. It encourages connections and comparisons. Its accumulated contents are a resource for critically assessing problems and policies. Even revisions and rejections are potentially illuminating. Apart from everything else, work in this field is itself an aspect of making the media accountable.

We have not been searching for any new theories of the press, which would in any case be fruitless. But there is still much searching to be done in this territory. In particular, the various roles for journalism we have described and the rules that have arisen for carrying them out exist in rather primitive or simply pragmatic forms connected with daily practice. They lack much subtlety, and this actually reveals a certain robustness, but it also leaves the roles disconnected from wider ethical considerations and too easy to disregard or disrespect.

The next phase of normative inquiry should pay more attention to the connections between the rights and duties of those who produce the news and the wider issues of human rights relating to those who receive the news, are the subject of news, or are affected by news. This means going beyond the principle of free speech and publication as seen from the newsmakers' perspective. In practice, despite the changes affecting the media that have occurred over the last half century, we have not escaped far from the central issue that preoccupied the authors of *Four Theories*.