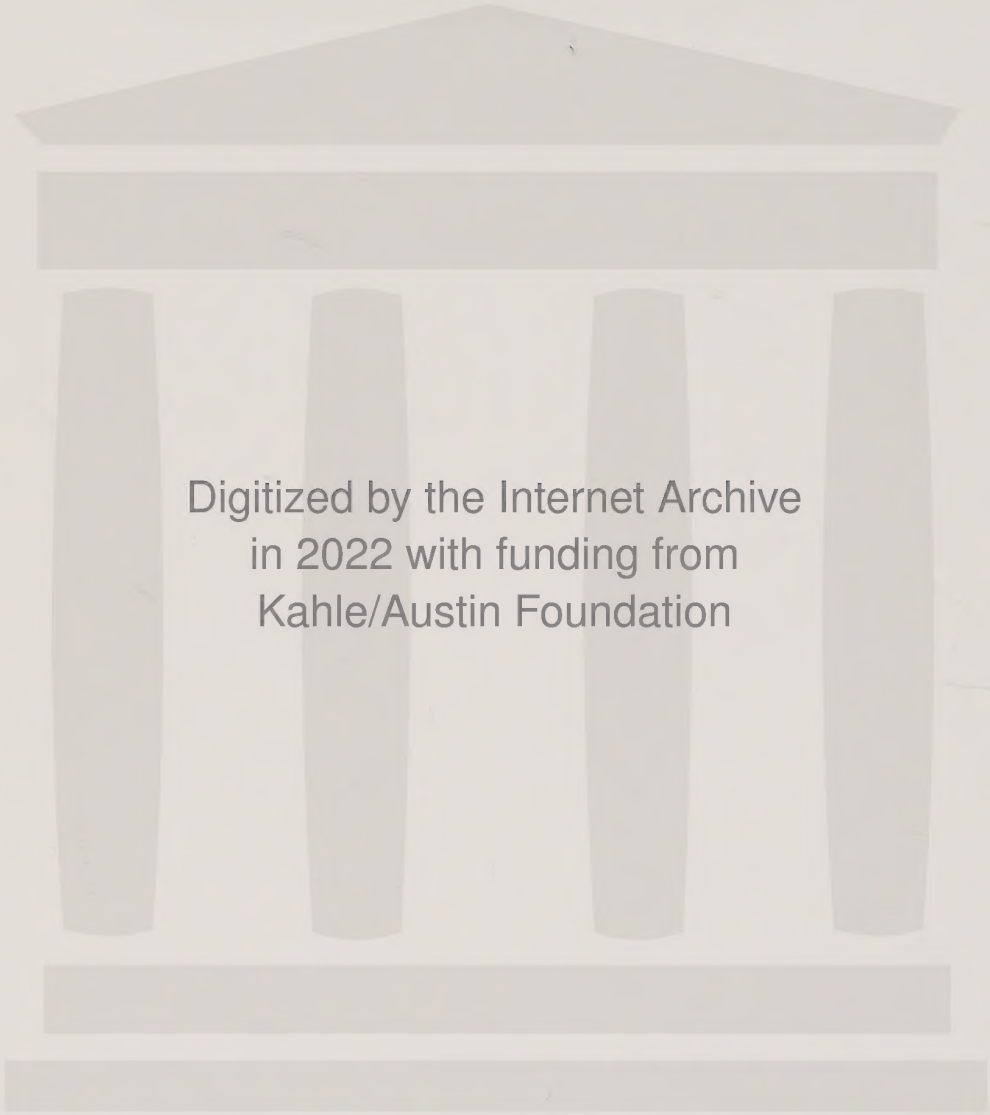
The Political Communication Reader

Edited by
Ralph Negrine and James Stanyer



The Political Communication Reader

The Political Communication Reader gathers together key writings on political communication from a range of leading authors, examining both conventional approaches and the newer realities of mediated political communication in advanced industrial democracies.

By drawing the boundaries of political communication as broadly as possible, this Reader offers a comprehensive overview of the key areas of debate, discussion and research within the field. The selected texts – each of which has been chosen because it has made a significant contribution to our understanding of the issues under consideration – have been organised into eight sections, whose content ranges from macro-level explorations of the place of the media in contemporary societies to micro-level examinations of the way the media play a part in civic and political life. Each section deals with issues and concerns that have a continuing importance and contemporary significance, including:

- the exercise of power, media and democracy
- the media and elections
- media effects
- political participation and the media
- the personalisation of politics
- new technologies and the reshaping of political communication.

This is an invaluable text for all students of the media, politics and communication studies.

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Ralph Negrine and James Stanyer

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION TRANSFORMED?

THIS READER APPEARS at a time when political communication in advanced industrial democracies is in a state of flux. What could be called the traditional model of political communication, based on limited and regulated channels of electronic communication, a stable press, and mass audiences with identifiable party loyalties, is giving way to a new, more decentralised and pluralised, structure – one characterised by fragmentation and uncertainty. To appreciate this transformation, it is important for students of political communication to be familiar not only with latest developments in the field but also with some of the traditional concerns.

What is political communication?

Before detailing the structure of this Reader, it is important to outline briefly what is meant by political communication. There have been numerous attempts to define it (see, for example, Wolton, 1990; or Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). A simple definition might be: all communication between social actors on political matters – interpersonal and mediated. That said, in the main, scholarly research on political communication has focused on the production and dissemination of political messages in the national mass media and their impact on citizen audiences. Political communication can be seen in this sense as involving three sets of actors – media institutions, political institutions and citizen publics – in a bounded political territory, usually a liberal democracy. This tripartite configuration is a useful starting point but, of course, it conceals complex and evolving interrelationships and dynamics.

Defining the boundaries of the field

Traditionally the boundaries of political communication research have been quite narrowly defined. The field has been concerned with the production of political messages and their impact, especially during election campaigns. As the field has matured, so the focus of those working within it has broadened. Indeed, at the start of the twenty-first century there are difficulties in defining where the boundaries of the field of study lie (Dahlgren, 2004). The traditional focus remains: for example, researchers continue to deal with processes of communication that relate to political matters, and, at a very broad and general level, examine the distribution and maintenance of power in democratic societies. However, in addition to this traditional focus, the process of socio-economic and technological change has generated new areas to explore and new challenges for the field as a whole. For instance, the issue of power has been central to the study of political communication. However, the increasing visibility of elites and the pluralised flow of information in the multi-channel democracies means the position of political elites has never been more vulnerable. New technologies have opened up opportunities for once marginalised voices to enter the public sphere and contest the definitions of the powerful. This Reader seeks to draw the boundaries as broadly as possible, incorporating new issues and debates in the field. One outcome of this fairly loose definition of what the study of political communication comprises is the opportunity to include within it a whole range of topics that might otherwise be excluded if a traditional narrow definition was adopted.

The selection

It is the recognition that political communication is a broad field that informs, in part, the selections that are included in this Reader. The selection also seeks to reflect some of the traditional research concerns. For example, the section on media effects (Section 5) draws on some of the key pieces of research on the subject produced over the past fifty years. Inevitably, considerations of length and accessibility have also played their parts in making the selection, but the aim has remained constant – namely, to offer readers a selection of texts on key aspects of the study of political communication. Some of these are obvious, some are less so, but when taken together they hopefully provide a considered view of the main elements in this field of study.

In very general terms, the texts range from macro-level explorations of the place of the media in contemporary societies (Section 1, 'Media and democracy', for example) to micro-level examinations of the way the media play a part in civic and political life (Section 8, 'New media, new politics'). In between, the extracts include such topics as election campaigns and campaigning, the personalisation of politics, the onset of the new media, and the place of weblogs in contemporary politics, to name but a few.

The structure of the Reader

Each of the eight sections tackles a set of topics that are central to understanding political communication in contemporary liberal democracies. There is, of course, some overlap but the following represent the key themes of this Reader.

The exercise of power

It is perhaps difficult to avoid the conclusion that, despite the need for a broad understanding of the contours of this field of study, political communication concerns itself with aspects of power: how power is achieved and how it is maintained, and how those who seek power, or seek to alter the distribution of power, engage with the media in order to do so. This explains the inclusion of the following three sections: Section 1, 'Media and democracy'; Section 2, 'Media and political advocates'; and Section 3, 'Elections and campaigns'.

Section 1, 'Media and democracy', is perhaps the most general in scope and is primarily concerned with the need to understand where media organisations are located and what roles they play, or should play, in mature democracies. Are they simply vehicles that are used by those in power to maintain their positions? Are media organisations part of a complex of powerful institutions that are somehow distinct or separate from the public or citizens? Are they beholden to political institutions or to their economic masters? And, much more generally, Section 1 concerns the need to understand the range of accounts that all contribute to an explanation of the role of the media in democratic societies.

Such questions throw up many answers and these are reflected in the selection of texts. Beginning with a short extract from **Lippmann**'s *Public Opinion*, Section 1 includes well-established critiques of the media (for example, **Klaehn**'s discussion of the 'propaganda model' applied by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky) as well as accounts that offer a more institutionalised perspective on the arrangements that sustain the media and political actors in society (for example, **Swanson**'s (1997) piece on the 'political-media complex'). In these, and the other extracts included in Section 1, there is an opportunity to interrogate different approaches to the study of the media – some of these highlight economic imperatives and ownership, others institutional arrangements, still others provide insights on the need to reformulate how we understand the role of the media over the last fifty years.

Taken together, these extracts produce a set of questions about the media and democracy that require careful thought. More importantly, perhaps, these questions can frame other questions about the study of political communication itself. For example, how useful is it to study micro-level aspects of the media, if the role of the media is circumscribed by an external, overarching and often hidden dimension? How useful is it to study elections, say, if the media never question fundamental aspects of the organisation of elections (e.g. majoritarian, first-past-the-post, funding) or the legitimacy of the process itself or its outcomes (e.g. as a consequence of low turnouts)?

The point to note is that no study of political communication can avoid highlighting the larger context within which the communication of politics takes place. After all, the media – newspapers, television, the Internet – are part of economic, cultural and political landscapes and these may, at some level and in some way, circumscribe what they do and how they do it.

If Section 1 alerts us to macro-level issues and themes, Sections 2 and 3 offer more specifically targeted accounts of how we may need to explore the role of the media: first, in relation to the media's counterparts in the practice of political communication (namely, the politicians and other actors that play a part in drawing together the main issues and themes that populate our media), and, second, elections and campaigns.

Campaign communication

Section 3 focuses on elections, with two clear themes. The first is the more general one as it addresses the 'meanings' and 'purposes' of elections and their coverage. In the first piece, **Katz** (1972) asks the questions that are often overlooked: why is election coverage constructed in the way that it is, and who benefits from it? Is this the best way to meet the 'needs' of the citizen or are there better ways? While such questions bring forth a variety of answers, these can be read in a number of other contributions found in this Reader. For example, **Jamieson**'s piece (1992) highlights the more negative aspects of presidential campaigning – is that really to the benefit of the citizen? – and **Semetko *et al.*** (1991) explore the ways in which agendas are formed in the interaction between political parties and media. The possible impact of media coverage on levels of cynicism and turnout are touched on by **Capella and Jamieson** (1997); as well as by **Patterson** (2002) and **Putnam** (2000) in Section 6.

But the concern with the role of the media in election coverage as exemplified in the extract from **Katz** (1972) must be accompanied by more focused work on how elections are covered in practice and what sorts of influences have made that coverage what it is. Jamieson's (1992), for example, does the former, but the latter is dealt with in the other pieces in Section 3, pieces that explore how election practices have converged and are converging around such themes as 'Americanisation' and 'modernisation'.

Evolution of campaign communication

The presence of many pieces on election campaigns – in Sections 3 and 4 – can be justified by the fact that the study of elections plays such an important part in the study of political communication. Election campaigns are political events per se. They involve key political actors contesting power and they bring to the fore the processes through which those in power – or those who seek power – attempt to mobilise and persuade the voters. In the pre-television (and pre-Internet age), such activities were comparatively simple in their organisation and execution. The advent

of television and the Internet, changes in the make-up of political parties, processes of voter de-alignment, the development of new techniques of campaign, communication and marketing, among other developments, have immensely complicated the whole nature of campaigning.

While it would be too simplistic to attribute any of these changes to specific causes, the overall effect of change has been to recast the nature of campaigns and campaigning. When Sections 3 and 4 are read together one can get a better sense of how campaigns and campaigning has changed and what reasons are put forward to explain that change. In other words, if we were seeking to understand how election campaigns are organised and run – and why they are the way that they are – what would we need to examine? The answers include: processes of 'Americanisation' and 'modernisation' (both in Section 3) but also 'professionalisation', the introduction of new techniques derived from commercial practices, the globalisation of campaigns through the employment of consultants, new ways of thinking about campaigning and how parties may need to 'market' themselves, and the possible impact of these on such things as allegiance, membership of political parties and levels of turnout.

As for explanations of this transformation, there are several that can be put forward, ranging from **Blumler and Kavanagh**'s (1999) exploration of changes in political communication over the last century (in Section 1), to **Norris**'s notion of the postmodern campaign (in Section 3), and to **Scammell**'s (1998) considered account of why the practice of 'marketing' is so important in understanding the conduct of elections (in Section 4). Sections 3 and 4, therefore, complement one another and offer a range of texts that cover contemporary concerns about how election campaigns are run, why they are run as they are and the possible implications of this on voters' allegiances and preferences.

Globalisation

While the material in these sections is essentially taken from US and UK studies, the lessons that can be drawn are of much wider significance. This is so, in part, because some of these themes are in fact derived from comparative studies that, in turn, draw on the experiences of other countries. **Mancini**'s (1999) piece on professionalisation, for example, reflects on the Italian experience, **Negrine and Papathanassopoulos** (1996) contrast the UK and Greek experience, and the extract from **Plasser and Plasser**'s (2000) study of political consultants is itself part of an international study of the consulting 'industry'. In other words, what appears at first sight to be a US- and UK-centred discussion is in fact a discussion drawn from a wider set of examples and thus has a much wider relevance. It should follow, therefore, that part of the task of Section 4 is to identify those sets of issues that can be used for exploring the nature of campaigns and campaigning in a range of non-Anglo-American contexts. To quote from a recent volume on political communication: 'in the twenty-first century we are confronted with developments in the realm of politics and mass communications that rule out the conception of political communication

as a phenomenon that could be defined within singular national, cultural, or linguistic boundaries. In fact, the challenge today is to face the developments and consequences arising from the modernization and globalization of political processes' (Pfetsch and Esser, 2004: 4).

Political advocates and media relations

Unlike the three sections that concentrate on macro-level issues, including those related to election campaigns and campaigning, Section 2 moves the focus towards different sets of relationships between the media and a range of actors. **Blumler and Gurevitch**'s (1995) piece explores the relationship between politicians and the press and the different roles that each takes on in the process of news-making. **Timothy Cook**'s (1998) piece similarly touches on such high-level considerations, but his piece addresses the broader question of how we are to understand the media in the political system. By looking at the process of news-making, Cook suggests that the media are implicated in the political process and must be seen as *part* of the political system and also as a political institution – not simply as something external to it, representing it, covering it and fundamentally separate from it.

Why these insights are important becomes clear in the other extracts in Section 2. **Wolsfeld** (1997) looks at how careful and considered use of the media brings with it political power, although that institutional power can be challenged by outsiders, in this case Palestinians fighting in the first Intifadah. **Hallin** (1994) looks at how, and why, elite opinion moved against the war in Vietnam; and **Manheim** (1994) at how different actors have come to learn to use the media to their advantage. What these extracts show is that far from being isolated and impartial systems of communication, the media can be employed by individuals and groups to their advantage. When those individuals and groups are part of the political world, the consequences are political in character and outcome.

Media effects

If the first four sections of this volume explore the macro-level nature of the study of political communication, Section 5 turns to the question of 'media effects'. When considerations of 'media effects' are raised, particularly in the context of political communication, the overwhelming interest lies in the sorts of direct 'effects' – effects understood as changes in voting behaviour as a direct and causal outcome of media content, for example. Often there are too many other variables to take into account – ranging from occupational through to experiential ones – to allow for such a narrow definition of effects to be identified in studies. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to suggest that studies do not tackle these sorts of topics and that they do not arrive at some sets of conclusions about such 'effects'. On the other hand, it would also be wrong to suggest that these were the *only* effects of the media to warrant consideration. In a sense, the texts in Section 1 (for example, from Lippmann) also discuss 'effects' but in a different and more global, albeit general, understanding of the term.

Section 5, therefore, consists of several texts that touch on fairly general understandings of media 'effects' as well as the more specific and narrowly defined ones. Effects research is perhaps the most well-established area of political communication research which has produced diverse and often contradictory findings. In **Lazarsfeld *et al.*** (1969) we have what became the dominant canon of post-war media effects research, the reinforcement doctrine. The power of the media to reinforce existing voting behaviour is also the conclusion of **Norris *et al.***'s (1999) research on the impact of the press on voting behaviour in the UK.

One of the first attempts to rethink the impact of the media was **McCombs and Shaw**'s (1972) study of agenda setting. If the media do not tell voters *what* to think, they may tell voters what to think *about*. This point is central to debate on the media's agenda-setting function, and taken up in the extract from McCombs and Shaw's study. A similar interest in the cognitive impact of campaigns can be seen in the work of **Lewis *et al.***, (1992) who argue that the media can misinform the electorate on certain issues. For **Capella and Jamieson** (1997) and **Iyengar** (1991), it is not the presence of an issue in the news that is important, but the way that issue is framed. Capella and Jamieson (1997) ask whether the news media's framing of politics creates cynicism, so debasing political discourse, and Iyengar (1991) questions whether the media's framing of political issues makes it more difficult to identify who is 'responsible' for actions such as terrorism.

The Langs' (1953) study of the MacArthur Day march in the 1950s raises the spectre of television's more general 'effects' on political behaviour – individual, collective and elite – but its inclusion here within a discussion of 'media events' highlights the ways in which television's role in granting ceremonial legitimacy to events goes some way to constructing a political spectacle and a spectacle with political consequences: we, as individuals and we as publics, respond to these in particular ways. The significance of this study is highlighted in the section from **Katz and Dayan**'s (2003) critical reappraisal of the study and it emphasises its continued importance today. If the extracts from studies by the Langs and Katz and Dayan alert us to the larger question of the 'effects' of television on the political system and on political behaviour, so do some other extracts in this section.

In these seven pieces, the themes move back and forth from general 'effects' to more specific ones, from a focus on collectivities to one on individuals. The point, though, is to be alert to an understanding of effects that goes beyond a single and narrowly defined one as impacting on individuals (and at election times only!).

The media and political engagement

Section 6 examines how individuals engage (or not) with the political process and the processes of political communication. Beginning with an extract from **Putnam**'s (2000) study *Bowling Alone*, the theme of this section is whether the media enhances or hinders political engagement and how it does so. Putnam suggests that television, among other things, has had an impact on political engagement, and **Patterson**'s study of 'the vanishing voter' points to a similar trend of non-engagement. The other extracts in this section illustrate engagement with mediated politics: from young

people and how they learn and communicate about politics (**Buckingham**, 2000) to participation in television's political output (**Jones**, 2005; **McNair *et al.***, 2003).

Personalisation

If the first six sections in this volume deal with more 'traditional' understandings of politics and political communication, namely, as an interest in institutions and political actors, Section 7 begins to move the focus away from this and towards less traditional forms such as personalities or celebrities, and scandals in the realm of politics. In other words, Section 7 takes us back to questions of television's role in changing the nature of political discourse and of the polity generally and highlights the ways in which the issues of personality and celebrity have now become a part of the political landscape. If the more traditional interest has lain in the idea of 'rational' debate and rational decision-making, this section turns our attention to the ways in which personality and celebrity have intruded into political debate and, to some extent, distorted more 'traditional' news values in the realm of politics and the political. Three of the six extracts deal with political scandals and the way they now are often the staple of political coverage; the other three extracts offer insights into different aspects of celebrity. For example, one extract looks at the ways in which Bill Clinton's image was constructed and the meaning of personality politics, while the other two pick up the theme in different ways. **West and Orman** ((2003) examine the meaning of celebrity politics in a general way, whilst **Glynn** (2000) tries to explain the election of Jesse 'the Body' Ventura in a media-saturated celebrity-obsessed age.

The interest in political communication evidenced in Section 7 is a world away from the interest in electoral behaviour or coverage of parliaments and political parties, yet it signals the much wider understanding of politics that we now have (and need to work with). Section 7 also offers a link to the extracts that feature in Section 8 which themselves draw our attention to 'new politics' in the context of 'new media'.

New media

Perhaps inevitably, no discussion of political communication in the twenty-first century would be complete without a detailed discussion of the Internet and the way in which it has changed both political behaviour and the production of political content. Many dimensions of this new medium in the field of communication remain little understood at present. For example, research shows that more people are getting their political news from websites and that traditional media are suffering as a consequence, but we still do not know enough how individuals navigate the web to get political content or how they receive/decode such content. Much work remains to be done in this area, as the web becomes established – it is still comparatively 'new' – but Section 8 shows that when it comes to use of the web, social and political movements have already established a pattern of working and have already learned how to use it to their advantage.

Using the web in new and different ways is the theme of most of the extracts in Section 8: the use of blogs, cyberactivists, and the discussion of 'smart mobs' all point towards a future where new patterns of communication (using the web) are increasingly established to connect people and to mobilise. By creating networks and linking people through the web, so bypassing the traditional media, new forms of action can be engendered and new challenges to the status quo can be made. Whether or not these new patterns of activity will overturn existing patterns rather than simply emphasise the continuities with the present is the theme of the final pieces in this section (**Margolis and Resnik**, 2000; Wallis, 2003). It is perhaps obvious that the well-established and the well-funded will tend to exploit the new forms of communication most – a point underpinning Margolis and Resnick's work – but it is perhaps too negative an analysis to suggest that it will be 'business as usual'.

The eight sections offer, therefore, an overview of the field of political communication. The extracts themselves highlight particular visions of the field. Issues of space have inevitably meant that certain areas have not been well served by this selection. For example, more could have been included about representations – of groups, individuals, nations even – and more could have been added to the discussion of audience reception of political content. That said, it is worth pointing out that some of our extracts touch on these issues. In respect of representations, the discussions in Sections 1 and 2 focus on the production of content. While they do not highlight specific representations they hint at who is involved in the production of political content and who is likely to benefit from that process. Similarly, although there is no section explicitly on audience reception, the discussions in Sections 5 and 6 illustrate how individuals and citizens make sense of politics and how the role of the media may have had a part to play in levels of engagement, in the comprehension of political news, and of content more generally.

These cross-references underpin one of the key points that readers of this volume should be alert to, namely, that while each individual section highlights particular issues and themes, the eight sections, when taken together, provide a wealth of material that contributes to a rounded understanding of this important field of study.

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Chapter 5

James Curran

RETHINKING MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

Source: James Curran (2000) 'Rethinking Media and Democracy', in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch (eds), *Mass Media and Society*. London: Edward Arnold, pp. 120–54.

Free market watchdog

THE PRINCIPAL DEMOCRATIC ROLE of the media, according to liberal theory, is to act as a check on the state. The media should monitor the full range of state activity, and fearlessly expose abuses of official authority.

This watchdog role is said to override in importance all other functions of the media. It dictates the form in which the media system should be organized. Only by anchoring the media to the free market, in this view, is it possible to ensure the media's complete independence from government. Once the media becomes subject to public regulation, it may lose its bite as a watchdog. Worse still, it may be transformed into a snarling Rottweiler in the service of the state. [. . .]

Market liberals had only accepted more extensive regulation of broadcasting on the grounds that the limited number of airwave frequencies made it a 'natural monopoly' (Royal Commission on the Press, 1977: 9; see also Horwitz, 1991). When the number of television channels multiplied [. . .] this 'special case' was undermined. What was right in principle for the press was now applicable, it was argued, to broadcasting. Television should be set free. [. . .]

Time-worn arguments

The traditional public watchdog definition of the media thus legitimates the case for broadcasting reform, and strengthens the defence of a free market press. At first glance, this approach appears to have much to commend it. After all, critical surveillance of government is clearly an important aspect of the democratic functioning of the media. [. . .]

However this argument is not as clear-cut as it seems. While the watchdog role of the media is important, it is perhaps quixotic to argue that it should be paramount. This conventional view derives from the eighteenth century when the principal 'media' were public affairs-oriented newspapers. By contrast, media systems in the early twenty-first century are given over largely to entertainment: Even many, so-called 'news media' allocate only a small part of their content to public affairs – and a tiny amount to disclosure of official wrong-doing.[1] In effect, the liberal orthodoxy defines the main democratic purpose and organizational principle of the media in terms of what they do *not* do most of the time.

The watchdog argument also appears time-worn in another way. Traditionally, liberal theory holds that government is the sole object of press vigilance. This derives from a period when government was commonly thought to be the 'seat' of power and main source of oppression. However, this traditional view takes no account of the exercise of economic authority by shareholders. A revised conception is needed in which the media are conceived as being a check on *both* public and private power.

This modification diminishes the case for 'market freedom' since it can no longer be equated with independence from all forms of power. [. . .] The issue is no longer simply that the media are compromised by their links to big business: the media *are* big business. [. . .]

[. . .]

Market suppression

[. . .]

(What all these examples point to) is the inadequacy of the liberal model which explains the media solely in terms of market theory. The media are assumed to be independent, and to owe allegiance only to the public, if they are funded by the public and organized through a competitive market. This theory ignores the many other influences that can shape the media, including the political commitments and private interests of media shareholders, the influence exerted through news management and the ideological power of leading groups in society. In short, this extremely simplistic theory fails to take into account the wider relations of power in which the media are situated. [. . .]

State control

If private media are subject to compromising constraint, so too of course are public media. There is no lack of examples where public broadcasters have acted as little more than mouthpieces of government (Downing, 1996; Sparks, 1998; Curran and Park, 2000). [. . .]

However, a qualifying note needs to be introduced at this point. The radical media literature is bedevilled by system logic which assumes that state controlled media serve the state and corporate-controlled media serve business corporations. This ignores, or downplays, countervailing influences. Privately owned media need to maintain audience interest in order to be profitable; they have to sustain public legitimacy in order to avoid societal retribution; and they can be influenced by the professional concerns of their staff. All these factors potentially work against the subordination of private media to the political commitments and economic interests of their shareholders. Likewise, the long-term interest of public broadcasters is best served by developing a reputation for independence that wins public trust and sustains political support beyond the duration of the current administration. [. . .]

[. . .]

The political culture of liberal democracies is very alert to the threat posed by governments to the freedom of public media, but is much less concerned about the threat posed by shareholders to the freedom of private media. [. . .] Elaborate checks and balances have been established in old liberal democracies to shield public media from the state. Yet, equivalent checks have not yet been developed to shield private media from their corporate owners.[2]

In sum, an unthinking, catechistic subscription to the free market is not the best way to secure fearless media watchdogs that serve democracy. Instead, practical steps should be taken to shield the media from the corruptions generated by *both* the political and economic system. [. . .]

[. . .]

Idealist legacy

A critical revision needs to think further not only about the functioning of the public sphere, but also about the idealist premises of liberal theory. The traditional justification for media pluralism – that truth will automatically confound error in open debate – now seems implausible. [. . .] [Such] reservations [are] based on distortions in the distribution of information and the subjective element in making judgments. [. . .] To these misgivings should be added a further reservation: the 'best' argument, in the sense of one best supported by evidence and logic, does not necessarily prevail against arguments that have more publicity and are more congenial to those in power. Yet, the liberal idea that media should offer a plurality of opposed opinion still seems essential, and defensible, for other reasons. It is a way of promoting not truth but public rationality based on dialogue; not rule devoid of error but a system of self determination informed by freedom, choice and a tradition of independence that comes from civic debate.

This raises the question of how media plurality should be conceptualized. The traditional liberal approach, still dominant in American jurisprudence, is to equate it with the free trade of ideas. This has given rise to the rule-of-thumb yardstick which measures media pluralism in terms of the number of competing media outlets or the division of market shares. The assumption is that if there is a significant level of competition, there is no lack of pluralism. [. . .]

This ignores where opinion comes from, and brackets out the question of social access. [. . .]

For this reason, pluralism cannot just be equated with competition. It needs to mean more than this: namely, media diversity supported by an open process of contest in which different social groups have the opportunity to express divergent views and values. This broader definition implies a commitment to extending freedom of expression, broadening the basis of self-determination, and promoting equitable outcomes informed by awareness of opposed opinions and interests. [. . .]

An alternative approach

If the conventional liberal approach has a number of flaws, how might it be replaced with something better? Perhaps the first step in rethinking liberal theory is to break free from the assumption that the media are a single institution with a common democratic purpose. Instead, different media should be viewed as having different functions within the democratic system, calling for different kinds of structure and styles of journalism.

[. . .]

A democratic media system needs, therefore, to have a well-developed, specialist media tier, serving differentiated audiences, which enables different social groups to debate issues of social identity, group interest, political strategy and normative understanding on their own terms. For some subordinate groups in particular this will be liberating because they will have the space and media arsenal to question social arrangements that restrict the social resources available to them and curtail their life chances. They will also be empowered by being able to question dominant discourses that legitimate their subordination, and will be in a position to develop alternative arguments that advance their interests.

This specialist tier also has a secondary democratic purpose of enhancing the political effectiveness of different social groups. It should include media that assist collective organizations to recruit support; provide an internal channel of communication and debate for their members; and transmit their concerns and policy proposals to a wider public. In other words, the representative role of the media includes helping civil society to exert influence on the governmental system.

Above this specialist sector is a general media sector, reaching heterogeneous publics. This should be organized in a way that enables different groups in society to come together and engage in a reciprocal debate. [. . .]

[. . .]

Built into this conception of a democratic media system is a desire to maintain some kind of equilibrium between conflict and conciliation, fragmentation and unity. The intention is to create spaces in which differently constituted groups can communicate effectively with themselves in order to facilitate the self-organization needed to advance their sectional interests. At the same time, these divergent groups need also to be brought into an arena of common discourse where reciprocal debate can take place in order to facilitate an agree compromise. Informing this approach is the hope that tacit acceptance of an inegalitarian social order will be replaced by an informed, unbiddable public, in which powerful economic forces are confronted by well-organized political ones. [. . .]

Notes

1 Estimates for the proportion of public affairs content in mass media are provided by Curran and Seaton (1997); Strid and Weibull (1998); and Neuman (1986) quoted in Abramson (1990).

2 In this context it is worth noting that the *Observer*, when it was owned by Lonrho, was different from most privately owned media in having 'independent directors' largely selected by staff who played a key role in resisting corporate corruption.

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