



Javnost - The Public

Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture

ISSN: 1318-3222 (Print) 1854-8377 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjav20>

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To cite this article: Jay G. Blumler & Stephen Coleman (2015) Democracy and the Media—Revisited, Javnost - The Public, 22:2, 111-128, DOI: [10.1080/13183222.2015.1041226](https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2015.1041226)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2015.1041226>



Published online: 15 Jul 2015.



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DEMOCRACY AND THE MEDIA— REVISITED

Jay G. Blumler and Stephen Coleman

The model which dominated twentieth-century analysis of political communication systems is now out of date in many respects. Essential in the authors' view is a reconsideration of some of the foundational concepts of political communication scholarship. They propose fresh lines of thought on: a communication-sensitive definition of democracy; the purposes of civic communication; evaluations of media roles in terms of those purposes; the politics–media axis; and new citizen roles in new-media conditions. Noting that values are always at stake in how political communication is organised, practiced and received, they distinguish two different conceptualisations of researchers' policy roles for harnessing and enhancing communication, citizenship and democracy—as a visionary destination and as a journey towards it, respectively. They conclude that both deserve prominent positions on academic road maps.

KEYWORDS citizenship; democracy; political communication; journalism; mediatisation; new media; communication policy

Introduction

There is one point on which most scholars of political communication would probably agree today: the core object of their analytical attention is in disrepair and possibly undergoing a paradigmatic shift (cf. among others, Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Blumler and Coleman 2013; Esser and Stromback 2014; Livingstone 2013; Swanson 1999).

The very model of political communication systems prevalent in the practice and scholarship of liberal democracies in the twentieth century has been transformed and is now out of date in many respects. What were once more or less bounded quantities of political communications are now abundant—in sources of supply, varieties of genre and devices, locales and moments of reception. The domination of a single medium (television) has given way to multi-platform communication. What was once a pyramidal, top-down political communication system has become an up-and-down and reciprocally round-the-houses one. Relationships between the principal political communication actors have been reconfigured. Politics itself is differently situated in the overall societal and communications scheme of things from how it used to be. Whereas political culture, institutions and practices were once infused with both sacred and secular elements—both as a sphere of intrinsic worth and as a down-to-earth scramble to gain and maintain power and influence—sacred sentiments have, over time, occupied an ever-narrower space in the thinking and behaviours of leading politicians, journalists and citizens. Where a relative uniformity, coherence and simplicity once prevailed, everything now seems to be laced with complexity, multiplicity, variety and cross-currents.

These developments have challenged the scholarly community to address political communication in fresh ways. In response, the evolution of transforming trends has been mapped; research priorities have been re-set; and many new avenues of empirical enquiry are being opened up (cf. Graham and Dutton 2014). Also essential in our view, however, is a reconsideration of some of the foundational concepts of political communication analysis. What follows are our offerings on that plane.

A Communication-sensitive Definition of Democracy

The starting point of this journey must be the meaning of democracy, which is a Protean idea if ever there was one! Democracy is claimed by many different political systems, including even ones with severely restricted and non-existent oppositions. It has also been attached to the conceptualisations of a wide range of theorists. Stromback (2005), for example, finds four models of democracy in the literature: procedural, competitive, deliberative and participatory. Christians et al. (2009) specify four other models: pluralist, administrative, civic and direct. To these could be added (among others) Manin's (1997) notion of audience democracy and Held's (1995) of a cosmopolitan one.

Thus, as the philosopher W. B. Gallie (1956, 183–187) suggested, the term “democracy” is an “essentially contested” one. But he also asked whether there could be some part for reason to play in transcending fruitless “dog-fights” over its meaning. That depended, Gallie maintained, on the class of concepts to which “democracy” belongs. Clearly it cannot be placed in the realm of science, where empirical evidence is the final arbiter. Neither should it be situated, Gallie argued, in the sphere of ultimate tastes and preferences. Democracy was rather what he called an “appraisive” concept, wherein what is involved is not “observed facts or psychological dispositions” but “recognition of a value which given [one's] particular appraisal situation is conducive for” the person concerned (1956). This opens up spaces for reason to enter into discussions of the definition of democracy and its requirements, when, in Gallie's words, “it may be possible to explain or show the rationality of a given individual's continued use of the concept in question”, throwing “in fuller relief some feature of [a] ... valued style of performance” (1956). It follows that debates over conceptions of democracy and citizenship are not necessarily meaningless. They can be clarifying over what is at stake when different positions are taken on them, about the reasons and reasoning underlying different positions and about the implications and consequences that may flow from them.

We propose to adopt a view of democracy which has the advantage of directly drawing attention to the part that communication should play in its service (something which many political theorists, including those who have discoursed at length about the meaning, values and demands of democracy, have surprisingly ignored). In our view, democracy should be conceived in terms of the ideal of collective self-determination. In great part, this is a matter of how, as Christians et al. (2009, 65) have put it in their book on normative theories of the media, “public discourse should be carried on in order for a community or nation to solve its problems”.

Three important implications follow from regarding democracy as an ideal in this way. First, its realisation becomes a matter of more or less rather than one of either/or. Secondly, it almost always involves a struggle against powerful and entrenched forces of so-called “realism”—hierarchical, manipulative and institutionally inertial forces—in the course of

which, however, the democratic ideal often shows itself to be resilient and enduring. Thirdly, the ideal is not to be equated with any particular system of political or electoral organisation—whether direct or representative, presidential or parliamentary, majoritarian or consensual, proportional or first-past-the-post-ish.

The Purposes of Civic Communication

Although certain significant purposes of civic communication may be derived from this notion of a democratic ideal, they are too often formulated as little more than worthy platitudes, which can justify almost anything that might be undertaken in democracy's name. Our sense of those purposes needs to be freshened so as to become more relevant and to serve as pointed standards of critique and evaluation and as guides to communicative practice.

Five purposes of civic communication would fill this bill:

1. To feed citizens' needs for surveillance of those parts of the political environment that matter to them, their families, the groups with which they identify and their societies at large—amply, accessibly and reliably; that is to say, not misleadingly.
2. To uphold the norm of meaningful choice over those issues and problems which ultimately may determine how we live with each other. This purpose is so supremely important, traceable back to the liberal philosophic ideal of freedom of choice as a *sine qua non* of human fulfilment, that we should pause to clarify what it could involve for democratic politics. It is not synonymous with the treatment of opposed political views with due impartiality, however desirable that may be. After all, the proclaimed differences between mainstream positions may at times offer citizens a relatively narrow and circumscribed choice, prompting the common complaint that "they're all just the same", for example, or radical critics' condemnation of neoliberal capitalism. Similarly, it should not be equated with a readiness to hold the ring between the main organised competitors for power—namely the major political parties. Political debate in many countries has become less bipolar by the entry into the public sphere of a large number of campaigning and protest groups whose activists and members do not regard the established parties as suitable vehicles to pursue their goals. Nor is this norm well served when a society, such as the United States today, is sharply divided between ideologically and aggressively polarised political camps. Although such a situation does pose stark choices between the vocal alternatives, choice is limited rather than enlarged for the less ideologically minded citizen. And when battling forces confront each other in their ideologically dug-in trenches, information tends to become an instrument of warfare rather than an aid to understanding (Jack M. McLeod, personal communication, 7 July 2014). Instead, the criterion of meaningful choice is best understood in terms of the clarification of what is substantively at stake in how an important issue might be tackled or a problem addressed.
3. To provide an inclusive opportunity for all parts of society which are likely to be affected by policies, or who hold views upon alternative approaches to policy, to be recognised and able to make their voices heard. This follows from the basic sense in which in democracies, unlike other systems, all citizens are equally entitled to be well informed and taken into account when decisions relating to them are being made.

4. To oblige holders of all significant forms of power (political, economic and cultural) to account for how they are exercising it and to ensure that so far as possible a public interest is being served. For the realisation of this purpose—which has variously been expressed in terms of the media’s watchdog role, their duty to investigate suspected abuses and to “tell truth to power”—the independence of the main means of communication from other power sources is essential.
5. To provide navigable avenues of comprehending exchange and dialogue between citizens and ultimate decision-takers, affording the former real opportunities to influence the latter and the latter to know the former better. While the media have long claimed to make the powerful more accountable to the public, they have set themselves much more modest ambitions in terms of enabling citizens to account for themselves to their elected representatives or to one another. In opening up such multiple lines of cross-cutting communication, the media could contribute to an enriched democratic discourse in which social distances are transcended and political modes of “addressing the masses” give way to more free-flowing conversations.

Like democracy itself, all these purposes of civic communication are conceivable as ideals, which may be realised to a greater or lesser extent. However, they will stand a much better chance of being realised in economically and socially more egalitarian polities and communication orders. They also need to be underpinned by certain facets of political culture. One is an awareness of human fallibility, which is to say that all political actors—politicians, journalists, commentators and citizens (even academics!)—may err in their selections and interpretations of information and in their ideas for political advance and change. Another facet is a respect for difference as a built-in feature of the human condition, reflected in the many different life-goals that people can envisage, the ways of life which they can value and enjoy, and the ways of thinking about the world around them that they can entertain. A third facet requires a subtle and complex appreciation of the interconnectedness of things. This means that political issues, problems and conditions must always be considered in the round, not as isolated specifics, but in broader contexts often with repercussive trade-offs so far as policy is concerned.

Indeed, it is essential for political communication scholarship itself to be infused with such recognition. On the one hand, its analyses should reflect the fact that, in large, complex industrialised societies, political messages emanate from firmly formed political communication systems, which are shaped by surrounding contexts of political culture, the political system and its principal actors, media organisation and the roles of journalists within it and the heterogeneous orientations to politics of different sorts of citizens and receivers of communication. But on the other hand it is also essential to accept that everything that we need or would like to know about all this cannot be comprehended in one big gulp. The acquisition of mature and secure understandings of political communication phenomena must be a shared, incremental, trial-and-error process based on a philosophy of “holistic empiricism” (Blumler 2011).

Evaluations of the Political Communication Process

In their essay on “Political Communication Systems and Democratic Values”, Gurevitch and Blumler discussed “the tensions and disparities between the ostensibly

democratic ideals that the mass media are supposed to serve and the communication structures and practices that actually prevail" (1990, 269–270). How might an updated assessment of this relationship appear a quarter-century later? How does mainstream political communication stack up today as an instrument of those civic purposes that we have spelled out above.

What about catering for citizens' surveillance needs? Information provision is of course journalism's *raison d'être*, something which all its practitioners claim a special responsibility for undertaking. There is a clear distinction to be drawn, however, between broadsheet and tabloid newspapers and between public and commercially funded broadcasters in the amounts and kinds of political information which they purvey—a difference (for short-hand purposes) between dispensing hard and soft news. In a massive (27-nation) analytically and statistically sophisticated and methodologically rigorous study, Fraile and Iyengar (2014) have provided the latest word on the effects of this difference on audience awareness. As they have put it, their evidence convincingly shows that "exposure to hard-news-oriented sources ... produces significant information gain while exposure to soft-news-oriented outlets do not" (2014). Such exposure even enables politically indifferent readers of broadsheet newspapers to catch up to some extent with their more politically minded counterparts.

A related distinction can be drawn between commercial and public broadcasters in how they tend to compose political stories. Longitudinal research has documented an increasing tendency for newscasters in all broadcasting organisations, whatever their revenue source, to engage in so-called "explanatory journalism"—that is, to supplement the facts about political events with interpretative commentary, voiced by journalists (Fink and Schudson 2014). However, whereas reporters in commercial outlets tend to gear their remarks to audience members' everyday lives, public broadcasters—as a matter of policy, organisation and staffing—have invested more heavily in news analysis and aim additionally to contextualise in terms of economic trends and political implications (Lischka 2014). Moreover, empirical research suggests that this approach pays off in citizen learning (Fraile 2013).

Such positive assessments of more serious journalism must be conditioned, however, by two insufficiently recognised considerations. First, few if any of the investigators who have ploughed this field have fertilised it with the insights of agenda-setting research. After all, much of the information presented in the media and acquired by their consumers will be bounded by and relate strictly to those issues and problems which happen to have been chosen for coverage by political journalists. Whether it is worth knowing, provides insights into developments of consequence or strengthens citizens' abilities to hold power-wielders to account are different matters. Information gain, then, may not be an unqualified blessing—it depends on prior processes of journalistic selection. Secondly, more thought should be given to the distinction between two different types of contextual material which serious journalists, however objective and neutral they may intend their treatments to be, may present to their audience members. It is as if, on the one hand, they can be painters of landscapes, in which reported events and claims can be located, while more or less leaving it up to citizen-observers where to direct their gaze and how best to make sense of it. On the other hand, they can operate more like photographers, who focus their camera lenses more sharply on some object of presumed political significance—that is, on alternative ways of facing up to and dealing with the key issues of a period. Of course these approaches are not mutually exclusive, but the second is arguably

more likely to serve the value of “informed choice”, especially for those citizens with limited attention spans who inhabit today’s environment of communication abundance.

How well do the media serve the purpose of providing meaningful choice over contested questions? In liberal democracies this criterion is satisfied to some extent in two conditions. One is during election campaigns, when there is a big step-up in media coverage and the airing of differences between the main competing political parties over the broad direction of travel along which government should be taken in future years. As Katz (1971, 304) once declared, “Election campaigns, for all their faults, may be the major learning experience of democratic polities”. But even this enlargement of choice may not be an unmixed boon. In highlighting and concentrating on certain issues, campaign rhetoric and reporting may sideline and neglect others. Campaign commitments can be blatantly ignored afterwards (Coleman and Blumler 2011). Also, alternative ways of implementing policy ideas that were unfurled in the winning party’s manifesto will have to be hammered out later in the inner counsels of Ministers and officials (King and Crewe 2013), with possibly little regard for the views and needs of people who may be profoundly affected by whatever is decided.

In his indexing theory of press–state relations, Bennett (1990) posits another condition when a fairly definite political choice may be presented and debated in the media. That is when inter-elite differences over an issue become so great and all-encompassing that journalists are almost bound to cover them thoroughly from several angles. But as Bennett also points out, due to its penchant for novelty and its dislike of messy complexity, political journalism actually ventilates such issues *in extenso* and in the round only rarely. Moreover, windows of opportunity for the provision of choice may often be closed by the common practice of news “framing”. As Blumler and McQuail (2001, 234) have explained, “No issue is usually presented ‘bare’ in the news”. They are often “dressed” explicitly or implicitly in frames which indicate or imply how the issues concerned have arisen, the problems for society that have resulted, who or what actors or conditions were responsible for their occurrence and what solutions of them most merit consideration. Consequently, as Robert M. Entman (1993, 55) has put it, news framing “sets the boundaries of discourse over an issue” and is probably most influential in what it excludes from consideration, which, if so, categorically violates the principle of meaningful choice. But the normative need for journalism to keep alternative frames in play and not to concentrate all its fire on singular ones—for example, to present Keynesian economists’ diagnoses of the recent financial crisis as well as those who pin the blame on excessive public deficits; to present needs to sustain or increase spending on the welfare state and public services rather than lower it; to depict immigration as an enriching rather than a threatening process; or to approach Russia as a possible partner in diplomatic efforts to resolve the Ukrainian situation and not only as an ever-aggrandising source of it—should not be confused with the norm of impartiality, because impartiality can be realised by conscientiously reporting different opinions about problems which have been defined in advance by the lineaments of a predominant frame of reference.

What about inclusiveness? In our view, mainstream journalism continually flunks this test! Of course it is natural for journalists to turn to elite figures (to “accredited sources”, as Hall et al. [1978] termed them), who are articulate, close to the arenas in which decisions are taken and dependably media-savvy, for opinions on the issues of the day. But the pernicious opposite side to this coin is a regular, persistent and systematic exclusion and distortion of the situations, experiences, needs, claims and views of those more marginalised groups in

society whose members are lowest on the totem poles of power, knowledge and vocal confidence (Bennett 1996; Hayes and Guardino 2010; Zaller and Chiu 1996). One thinks in this connection of the miserly communication hands that are dealt out to poverty-stricken dependents on welfare, to ghetto dwellers, ethnic minorities, immigrants and asylum seekers, to young people of limited education and life-chances and, in Britain, even to trade union leaders and shop stewards. This is not only a recipe for entrenched stereotyping and sustained injustice. It deprives the body politic of information relevant to the issues that the rest of society imagines it is equipped to tackle.

The verdict on communication for political accountability in liberal democracies may be more positive. The results of investigative journalism appear quite frequently in the news media these days—perhaps because they neatly combine pursuit of a civic purpose with prospects of attracting audience attention amidst the clutter of numerous rivals' attempts to do the same. An increased concern to uphold the rights of formerly less protected groups (e.g. children, patients, victims of rape); pressures to end formerly more tolerated abuses (e.g. tax avoidance schemes, telephone hacking by tabloid journalists, the excessive bonuses of bankers and the extravagant expenses' claims of the members of the British Parliament); and demands on public authorities for greater transparency over their decision-taking processes—all may be attributed in part to the performance by the mass media of what Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948) once termed "the enforcement of social norms" function.

However, exercises of investigative journalism are not all of one piece. They may differ in motivation and commitment, targets, resource allocations and techniques of exposure. Goddard, Corner, and Richardson (2007) have presented a detailed and illuminating case study of substantial permutations in investigative practice by the UK Granada Television company's *World in Action* programme across the three decades of its existence in response to exogenous change (in the country's political, economic and regulatory systems) and internal conditions (e.g. financial stringency) The fact is that investigative journalism may or may not be: relevant to a recognisable public interest; more or less responsible in its collection and interpretation of evidence and in its regard for the rights and potential vulnerability of all individuals involved in or affected by publication of the revelations concerned; more or less indulgent in unwarranted generalisations from individual cases; and more or less tied to power sources with their own axes to grind.

What about the creation of navigable avenues of comprehending exchange and dialogue between citizens and decision-takers? Although with the arrival of the Internet on the political communication scene the number of such channels has greatly multiplied and they are being increasingly utilised, the cultivation of mutual understanding among the participating communicators is still a remote prospect. Indeed, it is precisely because of the declining significance of the industrial-transmission model of public communication and the emergence of the ceaseless buzz of networked interactions in which it is often difficult to distinguish between trending noise and meaningful signals that journalists could adopt a new function as curators and interpreters of public communication. The navigational role for democratically-inclined media organisations is especially important in this respect: as well as making sense of what is being expressed within the vastly expanding mediopolis, they should be helping the less confident, literate (in many senses) and well-resourced to find entry points leading to forms of public expression that could enhance their efficacy.

The Politics–Media Axis

Political communication scholars' perennial preoccupation with twists and turns in the pivotal inter-relationship of political institutions and media institutions, politicians and journalists (cf. for overviews of this concern, Swanson 1992; Blumler and Gurevitch 1981, 1995; Iyengar and Reeves 1997; Graber, McQuail, and Norris, 1998; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Pfetsch 2014) demands yet another re-visit. Over time, these relationships have been in a state of what Blumler (2014) terms "structural flux", and what appears to be a fresh conceptualisation of them has been steadily permeating political communication scholarship since the turn of the twenty-first century (from approximately Mazzoleni and Schulz [1999] to Esser and Stromback [2014]). Called "mediatization theory", this refers to an alleged process whereby political institutions, their leaders and officials feel obliged or otherwise motivated to adapt their messages for public consumption to the news values, newsroom routines and journalism cultures prevalent in their societies. According to Esser and Stromback (2014), its two key concepts are political logic and media logic, comprising different "logics of appropriateness" to guide behaviour, thought and decision-taking in the different spheres of politics and the media. Political logic is said to apply to processes of coordinating, balancing and aggregating interests, organising negotiating and bargaining, defining policy choices and devising action programmes through deliberation and collective decision. In contrast, media logic is a quite different way of seeing and interpreting social and political affairs. Depending on who has written about it, media logic is said to favour spectacularisation and dramatisation, pithy brevity, being attractive and entertaining, personalisation (including perpetually shining bright spotlights on top political leaders) and the recontextualisation of positions on events into narratives (or what journalists call "good stories"). According to the theory, mediatization is a process (not just an extant state of affairs), in which media logic is increasingly colonising the precincts of political logic, weakening the latter's status and influence on politicians themselves, not only as publicists but also as policy-makers.

From a civic standpoint, the consequences of mediatization could be numerous, substantial and worrying. They would derive from those imperatives which journalists tend to press on political leaders, their colleagues and aides to be or seem to be: nimble, novel and immediately responsive and relevant; demonstrably active (to avoid journalistic castigation for dithering); impressive in their proclaimed goals, targets and achievements (as when UK's Prime Minister Brown prematurely buried "boom and bust" in 2007); and combative (conflict being a prime news value). Such imperatives would not only tend to prioritise reporting by journalists and responses from mediatised politicians of short-term issues at the expense of longer-term ones (such as climate change and the environment, conservation of endangered habitats and species, population trends amidst an aging society, the future of public services and the welfare state, the future of higher education and the realisation of an acceptable degree of distributive justice amidst entrenched inequalities of wealth and income). They would not only tend to encourage high-voltage slanging matches between opposed politicians, which, survey evidence has repeatedly shown, many voters find objectionable. They could also tempt mediatised leaders to flout or disregard policy commitments made during a seemingly propitious news environment at one time, only to switch gear when the news agenda has moved on to other matters. All these tendencies could be recipes for electoral disappointment, since what people actually get out of politics will often not be what they were led to expect, leading in turn, as they accumulate, to

feelings of disillusionment, cynicism and that “crisis of disengagement” which politicians frequently deplore but seem powerless to overcome.

Despite impressive elaboration by its progenitors, fresh thought needs to be given to mediatisation theory. As Deacon and Stanyer (2015) maintain, its media-centricity disables it from taking adequate account of those features of political logic which may still have some staying power and to which some politicians and other opinion advocates may wish to adhere—thinking of themselves, for example, as involved in struggle on behalf of certain political ideals, as committed to personally held beliefs and aims and as empowering the people they represent. Political and publicity purposes may consequently be in some tension with each other, imposing on politicians at times a kind of balancing act, adapting to but not necessarily always adopting media logic. Assumptions that the resources of political logic are virtually depleted and is headed for a political dustbin may therefore be premature.

Dutch scholar Remko van Broekhoven (2014) has recently tried to theorise this tension by harking back to Max Weber’s (1919) classic essay “Politics as a Vocation”. In Broekhoven’s view, the approaches of politicians to the media and the public are not always and necessarily single-mindedly calculative and manipulative. They may also regard the pursuit of politics as a vocation, involving the qualities (as specified by Weber) of passion, proportionality and responsibility. Both strands may be found in the same political leader, albeit in Jekyll-and-Hyde-like switches from time to time! Thus, a certain amount of ambivalence may inhere in democratic political communication systems—not only in politicians, but also in journalists and even among citizens. The trouble is that in combination, the predominant economic, political and media systems do not lend a great deal of support to the vocational sides of political actors’ civic natures.

All that said, there are signs that some mediatisation theorists are starting to recognise that the traffic between media and politics does not run along a one-way street but instead constitutes a multiplicity of reciprocal interactions with variable consequences (for example, Marcinkowski and Steiner 2014). The conduct of empirical case studies (which are on the increase at present) of various political groups’ attempts to attract media attention to, and thereby public support for, their causes is likely to encourage conceptual revisions which take account of those resources at the disposal of political institutions and actors that at times may enable them to resist media colonisation, to pursue their objectives with integrity and to preserve some of their identities.

A summary question, which is too rarely addressed, arises from the analysis so far. Is a political communication system in which most ideas about, endeavours to change, impressions of and information on public affairs must pass through journalistic filters good enough for democracy? One position on this might maintain that we simply have to accept the “rough” with the “smooth” of journalistic performance. The difficulty with this answer is that it entails acceptance of widespread alienation as a rooted and unyielding fact of political life. An opposite position, with which we are more inclined to agree, regards the mainstream journalistic institution as what historians have dubbed “an over-mighty subject”, the “rough” emanations from which are inimical to the ideal of collective self-determination. If so, the most pernicious fly that mainstream journalism plunges into the civic ointment is probably its subjection of political issues and events to a near-inescapable strait-jacket of predominant if not monolithic framing. And the excretions of that insect can place politicians in a double bind—either to capitulate to it or to buck it. But if they buck it, they may come across as if bucking reality itself!

New Media—New Citizens?

Thus far we have said little about the role of what used to be known as “the audience” for political communication. In their study of the Watergate affair in the United States as a communication event, Gladys Lang and Kurt Lang (1983) referred to the public as “bystanders” who most of the time did little more than observe what was going on. They might or might not form opinions, but, unlike those who made decisions and formulated policies, whatever opinion they formed could not be implemented. Since then, the citizens’ part in political communication has undoubtedly changed and is still evolving, thanks chiefly to the onset of media abundance and the advent of the Internet. Making sense of these changes, particularly in relation to the civic performance of the audience/public, calls for conceptual imaginative innovation. While wishing to resist the kind of technocratic hyperbole that has too often ascribed deterministic qualities to the Internet, and essentialist notions of “politics” that have tended to confine civic action to a participatory repertoire constrained by the imperatives of instrumental, and often Machiavellian, political gamesmanship, we observe a number of tendencies that make it necessary to reconsider the roles of citizens as audiences (and audiences as active civic publics) in a post-industrial media age. In order to elaborate upon these drivers of conceptual innovation, we shall consider four aspects of change that should inspire fresh thought.

Firstly, information abundance is having a mixed impact upon citizens’ capacity to find out about the political world in which they live. The range of lenses through which the dynamics of power can be observed, from the most local to the global level, is certainly broader than it was in an era in which national newspapers and broadcasters had a tight control upon the news agenda. But the overwhelming tendency is for established voices from the mass media and political elites to remain dominant online, at least in terms of the number of people they reach (Hindman 2008; Schlozman, Verba, and Brady, 2010; Webster 2014). While sources of original content have expanded, navigation technologies have not, with a few search engines (in the case of the Internet) and channel guides (for multi-channel digital television) shaping audience pathways. In short, it is premature to speak of a new flourishing of source and channel competition. Nonetheless, there is research evidence to show that when people do engage with mediated social networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, in which agendas are diffused across immediate and distant friendship circles, they are often exposed to ideas, accounts and campaigns that would not have come to their attention via the mainstream media environment (Xenos and Moy 2007; Conroy, Feezell, and Guerrero 2012; Hargittai and Shaw 2013; Vromen, Xenos, and Loader 2014). As more evidence about this emerges (Shaw and Weaver [2014] and Neuman et al. [2014] have made promising starts), there may well be a case for revisiting traditional agenda-setting theory and considering how some contemporary agendas are formed through a process of interdependent, but uncoordinated networking.

Whereas in the past audiences tended to receive political information at set times of the day from a limited number of mainstream outlets, whether deliberately or inadvertently as the case might be, there are now many more ways in which such messages may be encountered inadvertently. The new political communication environment is also more porous, fragmented and antithetical to the final word on any subject. But there is a sense as well in which information abundance increases citizens’ opportunities to pursue democratic surveillance on their own terms by seeking out untold stories and unreported data; comparing accounts to be found across radically differing global sites and channels; and,

from time to time, adding their own news, views and testimonies to the overall mix. The new media abundance thus raises some troubling questions for political communication scholars. With so many opportunities to scrutinise public affairs from such a range of viewpoints, can we speak any longer of a shared view of social reality? When much media exposure is inadvertent, what happens to those who never find themselves exposed to the kind of basic political information that sustains a shared sense of being a citizen within a local, national or transnational community? When patterns of media exposure are deeply fragmented, does this mean that people are looking at the world from a much wider range of perspectives—or might it be the case that ideological groups are herding around sites that can be trusted to reinforce their inflexible predispositions? These are empirical questions that some scholars are beginning to explore (Garrett and Resnick 2011; Webster and Ksiazek 2012; Mancini 2013; Waisbord 2014).

While questions about audience heterogeneity and its implications for civic cohesion are important, we need to be sensitive to the danger of conceiving citizenship in a monolithic, essentialist fashion. The forms of knowledge acquisition that have traditionally been regarded as bedrocks for “good citizenship” have tended to reflect a series of assumptions about “what citizens need to know”. Consequently, evaluations of political media effects have sometimes smacked of the schoolroom: the “success” of civic communication has reflected a narrow range of normative effects that have tended to reproduce an image of the audience as consumers and followers rather than makers of political narratives. Because conceptions of citizenship as an inherently pluralistic, contested and performative relationship have come to the fore in recent years (Blaug 2002; Miller 2007; Smith 2009; Coleman and Blumler 2009; Isin 2009; Dahlgren 2009), it becomes necessary to reconsider the notion of “civic knowledge”, linking it to the various emerging practices through which people not only encounter information, but find themselves interactively implicated in its construction, circulation and revision. In place of a vertically linear transmission of civic knowledge, which supposedly enables people to become effective citizens, the capabilities’ approach, as developed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), offers a promising framework for reconceptualising the information needs of audiences and publics. Rejecting the notion of imposed norms of democracy, which seem inherently paradoxical, capabilities’ theorists argue that needs should be constructed by people themselves, reflecting their own sense of entitlements and ways of realising them. Applications of the capabilities’ approach to the specific challenges of political communication have been rare (Garnham 1999; Coleman and Moss 2014), but we think there is considerable scope for employing it as a means of exploring potential forms of civic performance in an era of media abundance.

A second development in political communication that should prompt fundamental conceptual rethinking concerns the nature of collective action in an era characterised by the dissolution of centralised hierarchies and the emergence of what Castells (1996) refers to as “instrumental flows, and cultural codes, embedded in networks”. Modernist politics has traditionally been defined by collective action intended to influence what Easton (1953) called “the authoritative allocation of values”. Such collective action has always been easier for people who are richer and more politically powerful because they have found it easier than others to find and connect with one another. In contrast, organisations of poorer people, such as trade unionists, protesters and diasporic minorities, have tended to be hampered by the difficulties of coordinating their efforts across vast distances. There is an important sense in which the Internet is redressing this imbalance by opening up a space for relatively inexpensive collective coordination. In digital environments people

come to know about one another both in real time and asynchronously. Political mobilisation becomes a matter of mutual visibility. As political content circulates via digital technologies that facilitate large and relatively coherent networks, not organised in the hierarchical fashion of modernist politics, collective action is increasingly adapted by what Bennett and Segerberg (2012, 753) refer to as “the logic of connective action”. As they put it:

Technology-enabled networks of personalized communication involve more than just exchanging information or messages. The flexible, recombinant nature of DNA makes these web spheres and their offline extensions more than just communication systems. Such networks are flexible organizations in themselves, often enabling coordinated adjustments and rapid action aimed at often shifting political targets, even crossing geographic and temporal boundaries in the process. (Bennett and Segerberg 2012, 753)

While these new connective movements might not yet have become the dominant form of political coordination, supplanting long-standing models of institutional affiliation, their potential implications for political communication are enormous. In giving rise to innovative forms of unofficial, informal and transnational political connection, the new media environment compels us to reconceptualise some of the most embedded features of political communication research, such as the study of political campaigning, protest movements and public opinion. The notion of a political public sphere based upon physical assemblages, institutional centres and managed symbolic diffusion lacks freshness. Here lies another area in which we should be thinking hard about the relationship between the media and democracy. If, as Bennett, Segerberg and many other recent scholars (Howard and Hussain 2013; Sampedro and Lobera 2014; Theocaris et al. 2014) have suggested, the terms of effective political action are no longer what they were, we need to be working iteratively towards a new typology of political mobilisation, coordination and efficacy. This might differ in important respects from long-established notions of what political behaviour entails. For example, conventional dichotomies between the roles of leaders and followers might no longer be particularly helpful in trying to understand movements that are increasingly acephalous; ideological classifications might need to be redefined; assumptions about the limits of ephemeral participation might need to be revised; and conceptual distinctions between broadcasting and networking might need to be revisited. But case studies are also needed, designed to shed light on the ultimate question of whether these transformations are “conducive more to a public sphere of cacophony than to one of coherence” (Blumler and Coleman 2001, 12).

A third factor that changes the media–audience relationship is digital interactivity. The potential for receiver feedback is central to the Internet, offering hope of a more dialogical relationship between users and a diminution of the boundaries between production and reception. The monological presumption of analogue-broadcast media was that the audience, however active and interpretive, was essentially a mass entity that could be addressed. By contrast, digitised communication resists the logic of what Postman (1986) has called “the one-way conversation”. As horizontal media interactivity practices compete with traditional habits of viewing and listening in, it becomes more difficult to maintain distinctions between mass and interpersonal communication. The latter has traditionally been associated with face-to-face interaction, but, in an age when sociable

encounters are just as likely to occur via Facebook or Twitter as in physical space, it becomes necessary to think in terms of what Baym and Boyd (2012) call “socially mediated publicness”. At the same time, the Internet facilitates elements of networked mass communication via sites such as YouTube which enable individuals and groups to present themselves to sizeable global audiences without needing to pass through the gatekeeping filter of the professional media. How should we conceptualise these new patterns of public formation? In what sense is a political conversation between two people on Facebook a different kind of event from ones that take place in bars, community halls or union meetings? In what sense is a video produced by teenagers in their bedroom and then viewed by hundreds of thousands of people on YouTube not a mass-media product? Conceptual classifications between and within mass and interpersonal communication need to be reconsidered.

A fourth set of changes is policy related and, like the others discussed here, raises important conceptual questions about the extent to which the media can serve democracy. For one thing, when in the past a small number of communication sources dominated, it seemed possible for expressive relations between authority-holders, politicians, journalists and members of the public to be regulated relatively effectively. But state responses to offensive, defamatory, abusive or otherwise inflammatory content have proved extremely difficult to conceive or enforce with the proliferation of Internet channels and the emergence of an environment where communication flows often bear no relation to the boundaries or laws of individual nation-states. One of the effects of globalisation is that the free movement of symbolic resources can be as unaccountably and recklessly unbounded as the unchecked movement of capital. In one sense, this is one of the great strengths of digital politics, especially in the contexts of those political regimes which hitherto found it relatively easy to maintain an authoritarian grip on the flow of public information and discussion. But media deregulation has just as commonly opened up wider spaces for corporate intervention in the public sphere, leaving vast numbers of people who engage in political discussion via social media sites vulnerable to commercial surveillance and even attempts to manipulate their personal information environments. Scholars are challenged to monitor and disclose these developments with an eye to the formulation of possible policy responses.

For another, the most ambitious (and, we would argue, successful) attempt to devise a democratic organ of civic communication—public service broadcasting—is under threat. A key conceptual question for democratic policy-makers, then, is how to create contemporary forms of public service communication that can contribute to the mediation of social solidarity rather than disintegration. At the very least, a modernised conception of public service communication should be to provide tools, skills and content that will allow publics to witness themselves and their life worlds; to provide tools, skills and content that will help diverse publics to make sense of one another; to monitor, facilitate and connect public deliberation on matters of common interest and concern; and to provide tools, skills and content that will enable citizens to understand the multifaceted and often discreet workings of power, and to hold the powerful to account in ways that can make a difference (Coleman and Ross 2010). We consider development of a fresh set of principles for public service communication in the digital, multimedia era to be a paramount challenge for all who care about the future relationship between the media and democracy.

Conclusion: Researchers' Policy Roles

A basic assumption and a difficult problem arise from the entirety of the above discussion. The assumption is that normative values are necessarily at stake in how political communication is organised—what it produces, what influences and relationships shape it, how it impinges on ordinary people's awareness of and outlooks upon the wider world and how far it enables them to be effective citizens. The problem is whether and how normatively-inclined scholars can contribute to the formation and workings of a more democratic political communication system. They may be said broadly to subscribe to two different approaches to this task. One of these (as in the thought of Habermas [1989] and Splichal [2014]) focuses on an ultimate destination—a vision of what the system would look like if communication, citizenship and democracy were firmly and securely harnessed to each other. The other approach thinks more in terms of a journey (as in the writings of Graber 2011; Jamieson and Jackson 2007; Zelizer 2011), taking as its point of departure certain evident inadequacies of the prevailing system and proposing ways to counteract, eliminate and improve upon them. Although both approaches face formidable obstacles to progress, both deserve prominent positions on academic road maps. For our part, we see no contradiction in having adopted both stances—in our more radical proposal for the creation of a “civic commons in cyberspace” (Coleman and Blumler 2009), and in our proposal to institute a series of dialogues between scholars and practitioners to consider an agenda of challenges to the adequacy of provision of communication for democracy and to discuss prospects for overcoming them (Blumler and Cushion 2014).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article started life as a lecture delivered by the first author at the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia on 31 May 2014, and was subsequently nourished by his collaboration with the second author. The article benefited greatly from an after-lecture discussion session with faculty members and postgraduate students of the University's Department of Communication and from comments by Lance Bennett, Lee Edwards, Jack McLeod, Giles Moss, Katy Parry, Slavko Splichal and David Weaver.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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