

Lecture VII – Mass media, political participation and civic engagement: pessimistic and normative views

Blumler and Gurevitch, *The Crisis of Public Communication*

→ Key issue of the book: “the tensions and disparities between the democratic ideals that the mass media are supposed to serve and the communication structures and practices that actually prevail... undermine the capacity of the system to serve those democratic ideals.”

→ B&G identify some key demands that democracy poses to the mass media. These are:

- Surveillance of the sociopolitical environment (reporting, more or less investigative)
- Meaningful agenda setting (the key issues of the day)
- Platforms for an intelligible and illuminating advocacy by politicians and spokespersons of other cause and interest groups (making voices heard)
- Dialogue across a diverse range of views, and between power holders and mass publics
- Mechanisms for holding officials accountable (the media as watchdogs for public opinion)
- Incentives for citizens to learn about and follow the political process
- Resistance to manipulation and external influence from power holders
- Respect for the audience member, “as potentially concerned and able to make sense of his or her political environment (as opposed to thinking that “people like the fluff”)

→ Not unlike Pippa Norris’s definition of the three tasks of democratic media as civic forum, watchdog, and mobilizing agents of political participation.

→ Four obstacles hinder the attainment of such ambitious goals:

1. Conflicts among democratic values themselves. Trade-offs and compromises are necessary, for example between the need to serve people’s interests and the desire to serve their tastes, or between the need to gather to the needs and values of the majority and to give voice to the extreme, oppositional views and sectors of society.
2. Elitism of political communication. The political communication system is an elitist system, not particularly close and sensitive to the needs and circumstances of the mass public. “The very structure of political communication involves a division between movers and shakers at the top and bystanders below, imposing limits on the participatory energy the system can generate.” Political communication creates “a public sphere commandeered by insiders”.
3. Interest of the audience. Not all members of the audience are political animals, nor are they obliged to be since democratic theory gives every citizen the right to not care at all. As a result, political messages are vulnerable because they must compete with potentially more interesting messages (e.g. from entertainment) and there is no certainty that they will be received properly.
4. Pressures from the socio-political and economic environment: the media are institutions that are constrained by the environment in which they operate. The biggest constraints come from market needs and political pressures.

→ The key function of the press might be seen as bridging the gulf between politics and people’s lives: by making political affairs more understandable, the news could get citizens involved in politics by helping them connect politics and policies with their everyday life, needs and interests.

From this point of view, even those characteristics of the news that apparently “dumb politics down” might be seen as healthy because they make politics understandable to the mass public. However, three facts stand against this view:

1. Surveys show that people learn very little from the news: news is a highly inefficient mechanism for conveying information.
2. The media professionals have little interest in what people really learn from the news and seem to be little inclined to change their practices accordingly.
3. “With many journalistic practices the means seem to have become the end”. Journalists treat politics as entertainment and as sports competition, not because they want to make it clearer, but because they actually think politics is like sports and entertainment (journalists as post-modern theater critics).

→ B&G apply a systemic perspective to political communications: political communication is a system in which all the members relate to each other through norms and standards that are crystallized and reliable, and that therefore make reciprocal behaviors predictable, thus reducing uncertainty among those who participate in the system.

However, “built-in system constraints tend to block and thwart the realization of democratic values”.

Relationships among the members of the system can be analyzed at four levels:

Societal level: includes all the interactions between the media and other powerful forces in society. Such interaction is more or less natural and is bound to reproduce the distribution of power in society (i.e., those institutions that are powerful outside the media system will sooner or later acquire the same power in the media system).

Economic constraints: the structure of ownership and control (increasing concentration, monopolies, large transnational multimedia corporations) and the dynamics of supply and demand (tabloidization, “dumbing down” the news, constraints from rigid formats, pressure from other media that are more relaxed in terms of news values and professional practices) influence political communication.

Political constraints: politicians can influence the media through direct regulation and through their authority as sources. Access to politicians and government officials is a very valued resource for the media because political power-holders can provide credible and authoritative information about many issues in the news. “Access management” as a key resource politicians control. (George W. Bush: the “charm offensive” in 2000 campaign).

Social constraints: status and prestige influence the possibility to have one’s voice heard in the news: those on the top of the ladder enjoy attention from the media, even reverence sometimes, and have the prestige and resources to manipulate journalists. On the other hand those who are at the bottom of the ladder enjoy little or no attention and are often labeled as marginal or deviant.

Inter-institutional level: two kinds of actors can be found in the political communication system: journalists and advocates. Each side is striving to pursue different goals toward the audience, yet it cannot normally realize its goals without the co-operation of the other side. Politicians need publicity, journalists need sources. Three problems arise.

- First, institutional functions which should be separated are often blurred. Politicians start to think as if they were journalists, therefore modifying their lexicon and their talk in order to make it easier for journalists to package the news. “When politicians can predict confidently which events and comments will ring reportorial bells, media professionals are deprived of opportunities to exercise their own judgment”. Yet the professional routines of the mass media, which politicians have discovered and learnt to exploit, cannot be changed without high costs on the part of the media.

- Second, the advocates' side has experienced high professionalization, resulting in advocates seeing politics and news as a power struggle more than as the pursuit of policy goals and ideals and of the public good. They tend to be skeptical about the democratic role of the media and the information-seeking citizen. They tend to think, just as many journalists do, that "people like the fluff".
- Third, journalists have reacted to such developments by becoming themselves skeptical. They "disdain the news", meaning that they distance themselves from politicians and from the news they report, as they are often "exposed" as more or less unsuccessful attempts of manipulation and propaganda. The media show what the politicians do and say, and then try to explain to the viewers that what they see and hear might well be fake or unintended. This attitude in the media might breed cynicism among viewers.

Intra-organizational level: the news media and journalists' goals and values may hinder their democratic role.

First, market obligations are well locked in journalistic professional principles, meaning that the key goal of journalistic organizations is to beat out the competition (by maximizing audience, being first with the news, or by scooping out the competitors). These goals, though necessary in a market economy, are hardly reconciled with democratic goals.

Second, widely shared news values and formats constrain what issues can be covered, in what terms, through what frame and to what extent. The result is that rarely do the news pass the boundaries of a "mainstream".

Audience level: even though the audience should be the king, it is the least organized of the three sides of political communication. As a consequence, the other two sides might well lose sight of the audience and care more about their mutual relationships. The audience is very little known, as statistical aggregates that tend to be shallow and over-simplifying. As a consequence, political communication key actors tend to over-simplify their audiences' images, even to disdain the audience, and to believe that "they give the people what they want", dismissing the audience "as if it were capable only of absorbing that which the system supplies".

→ In order to assess whether systemic political communication can change to better serve democratic needs, we need to consider what has changed and is changing in this field.

1. A thoroughgoing professionalization of political advocacy (we have already examined the consequences for civic engagement).
2. Journalists fighting back as they fear losing their independence (politics as a game, obsession for polls, attention to blunders, "feeding frenzies"). "Much of the snappiness of modern political communication arises from the influence of advertising on political culture, from the journalistic culture which reports political talk as inherently boring and from the assumption that people have incredibly short attention spans".
3. Normative uncertainty about the rules of the political communications game: journalists are torn between two opposed prescriptions:
 - a. Politicians should be held accountable only for those acts that have a demonstrable public significance.
 - b. Politicians are fair game for almost everything you can throw at them.
→ Monica Lewinsky demonstrates quite clearly that the second "rule" is prevailing, even though there are calls for reform.
4. Widespread projection of an image of the "turned-off" citizen: not only this works as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" with citizens, it works especially with political advocates, who are more and more convinced that citizens are skeptical and therefore adopt strategies that rely on citizens' cynicism and disdain for politicians, such as negative campaigning.

→ As a consequence, politics and the media are involved in “a chronic state of partial war”, resulting from various systemic pressures, including:

- Disengagement of formerly politically affiliated media organs from party ties.
- For journalists and editors, the problem that professional politicking makes it hard to get some genuinely independent news out of the routines of the collaborative political journalism.
- For politicians, the fear that negative stories and pejorative forms of critical journalism might damage their career ambitions.
- Increased competition within both camps: for audience among journalists, for voters among politicians.
- The greater intrusion of tabloid organs into politics, not only spilling over into quality coverage but also shifting the boundaries of what counts as proper coverage (and as news).
- Both sides’ attempts to persuade public opinion that the other side is to blame for the crisis of public communication.

→ What are the opportunities for improvement?

1. Reform should be voiced and sustained by a constituency made of politicians, scholars, journalists and voters who, with different roles and levels of engagement, should carry forward an agenda for reform in the political communication system.
2. Changes in the media landscape that create alternative political forum: call-in TV and radio talk shows, “soft news”, popular shows, MTV...
 - a. Since the 1992 campaign these outlets have become central in political communication.
 - b. Positive sides:
 - i. The ordinary citizen is restored as a significant point of reference for political communication and as an active participant in public discussion (even though most of the viewers and listeners of these shows do not participate, but actually watch their proxies participate).
 - ii. Substance is restored as a centerpiece of discussion: callers ask questions that are issue- and value-oriented. Example: 1992 presidential debates. First debate: journalists asked question centered on strategy and personality; second debate: voters asked questions about issues.
 - c. Negative sides:
 - i. Politics is portrayed as popular culture, it is staged as spectacle and theatre, and often the result is a shallow and image-based representation of politicians.
 - ii. It is not a dependable source of political communication because coverage in these shows is largely dependent on the “heat” of the situation. It could not work as a day-to-day form of political communication.
 - iii. Traditional, civically harmful forms of political communication have not disappeared and maintain their flaws.
 - iv. This book was written before Monica came to town...

→ As a consequence, two fundamental ambivalences are bound to remain in the political communication arena, influencing the relationships between journalists and politicians, between politicians and voters, between journalists and their audiences:

- a. between authenticity and manipulation
- b. between calculation and spontaneity.

Schudson, The Power of News

→ “There is a tendency to believe that if the television news sound bite has shortened from a minute to 10 seconds (and it has in the space of twenty years) the public capacity for sustained attention has shrunk accordingly. But this does not square with the intensity of careerism in business, the growth of the two-income family, the vitality of the pro-life and pro-choice movements, the return of religious revivals, and even the upturn in Sat scores.

Then what does media saturation mean? Consider a fast food analogy. Many people I know eat more Big Macs than salmon diners at fine restaurants. McDonald’s is faster, cheaper, more predictable, easier to squeeze into the rest of life. This does not mean that people prefer Big Macs to salmon. It does not mean, aside from economic tautology, that they greatly “value” Big Macs. It does not mean that their palates are jaded. It means that they have made some decisions about their priorities and, then and there, eating a good meal is lower on the list than quickly reducing hunger. I do not think the growing success of *USA Today* necessarily indicates anything different: it does not mean that people judge McPaper the “best” meal or the only meal they seek; simply that they find in it what they need from a newspaper at a given moment, given the constraints of daily life. With world enough and time, or with an important local issue, or with a hot presidential race, their choices might be different.”

→ Schudson’s point is that although news has become increasingly popular, implying a worse, less rich and valuable service to the reader than traditional news media, this does not mean that the public is not capable of getting serious and complex news anymore. Lifestyles have changed and the market has responded accordingly: just as fast foods have partially replaced restaurants, *USA Today* and Fox News have come to challenge the *New York Times* and CNN.

“The News Media and the Democratic Process”

→ Classic democratic theory: democracy is composed of rational and active citizens who seek to realize a generally recognized common good through the **collective initiation, discussion, and decision** of policy questions concerning public affairs, and who delegate authority to elected government officials to carry through the broad decisions reached by the people through majority vote. → The people discuss, then decide, then delegate.

→ Realist democratic theory: Walter Lippmann (*Public Opinion*, 1922). The citizen is not sovereign, but lives in a world which he cannot see, does not understand and is unable to direct. And the press cannot help much as it is almost entirely dependent on outside forces to record the activities of the political system.

- “We must abandon the notion that the people govern. Instead, we must adapt to the theory that, by their occasional mobilization as a majority, people support or oppose the people who actually govern. We must say that the popular will does not direct continuously but that it intervenes occasionally.” (Lippmann)
- The best that could be done was not to educate people (which is impossible), but to provide clear signs to serve as “guides to reasonable action for the use of uninformed people”. The task for democracy is to find ways for people to act “intelligently but in ignorance” (what today’s political scientists call *low-information rationality*).

→ Key problems in current democracies:

- Political parties have lost their importance as intermediaries between the governors and the governed, which is to “enable the coherent aggregation and articulation of popular views and insist on responsiveness by the governing officials to those views”. The consequence of the crisis of political parties (or, we should say, their transformation into business-like “tertiary groups” in Putnam’s terms), is “the loss of popular control over public policies and the consequent inability of less privileged elements to affect their social fate” (Gerald Pomper).

- The declining governability of society: the burst of participation in the 1960s has drawn into the process people and demands that are hard to satisfy.
- The increasing influence of big business on politics, which does not fit at all with democratic theory (one head, one vote).

→ Schudson's proposals: **the news media should be self-consciously schizophrenic in their efforts to perform a democratic political function.** They should both champion the kind of democracy that the political scientists say we have little chance of achieving and, at the same time, they should imaginatively respond to the realities of contemporary politics that the scholars have observed.

- Combat the stance that vote is pre-determined (by pocketbook interests, race, class, age, gender...) and contrast it with the democratic view that people's ideas can change.
 - One way of doing it: rely less on opinion polls that present citizens' opinions as fixed and hard to change, and which therefore leave little room to discussion and make campaigns appear silly and useless.
- Cover politics in a more balanced way. In Congressional races, for instance, incumbents get much more coverage than challengers, and "open seat" races get hardly any coverage. This does not square with the democratic ideal of elected officials' accountability.
- Hold governors accountable – not on behalf of the people, but on behalf of "the ideals and rules of the democratic polity itself". Doing investigative reporting trying to assess not if politicians are doing right or wrong, but if they are living up to what they committed themselves to.
- Take a better stance towards political parties, recognizing their fundamental role in democracy. This is hard because the media recognize that they are filling the power gap that parties have left (e.g. in the Presidential nomination process).
- Cover business's influence in politics, for instance keeping a running tab on important bills in which business has a big stake.
- In response to the single-issue proliferation and the "anger politics", try to pursue and communicate the democratic ideal of compromise as the key resource in a democratic system. Try to counter popular stereotypes about social groups that leave little room for compromise.

→ "In cases where an informed and involved electorate does not exist, the news media still have available to them alternative models of their democratic obligations. They can act as stand-ins for the public, holding authority (constituted – in the case of government; unconstituted – in the case of business, lobbies, and interest groups) responsible to its own stated aims and other publicly agreed-upon goals. They can do this simply by the power of the searchlight of publicity and by making that searchlight more constant... The virtue of schizophrenia is that both things are true under different circumstances."