

COMPARATIVE MEDIA POLICY, REGULATION AND GOVERNANCE IN EUROPE

UNPACKING THE POLICY CYCLE

EDITED BY

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Chapter 10

Media and Democracy: A Couple Walking Hand in Hand?¹

Josef Trappel and Hannu Nieminen

Media and democracy is like a couple walking hand in hand. Or at least they should be, according to the contemporary western understanding of democracy and the media. Walking hand in hand embodies trust, familiarity if not intimacy and responsibility for one another. In this chapter we analyse how media relate to democracy and vice versa. Furthermore, we suggest that media need democracy as much as democracy needs the media for well-functioning by emphasizing the entangled history of both institutions; we then focus on notorious as well as contemporary challenges of the relationship between media and democracy; finally, we demonstrate why democracy is crucial for the academic discipline of communication studies.

What democracy is about

Democracy as a way of governing has roots going back more than two millennia to the ancient Greek city-state. Today's concept and understanding was fundamentally shaped by Enlightenment and the French as well as the American Revolution in the second half of the eighteenth century. Following John Keane's (2009) definition, democracy refers to a type of political system in which the people or their representatives lawfully govern themselves, rather than being governed by a dictator, a totalitarian party or authoritarian monarch. Democracy can be seen as an ideal that all members of society should collectively decide how society is operated and regulated (Picard 1985).

The more complex societies become, the more sophisticated rules of decision-making are required. Voting is the preferred process of decision-making in democracies. 'The decisions made by the people in the voting booths are based on the information made available to them. That information is provided primarily by the news media. Hence, the news media are indispensable to the survival of democracy' (Altschull 1995: 5). In other words, 'the starting presupposition is that citizens are sufficiently informed about political and social matters that they are able to reach sound judgements and decisions. Thus, reliable and unbiased information is vital to the health of the democratic state' (McGraw and Holbrook 2003: 399)

How media and democracy relate to one another

The pre-eminent importance of information indicates that media and democracy are intrinsically linked to one another. This link has at least two qualities: formal and informal.

The statutory link could not be any stronger. At the constitutional level of every democracy, there is reference to at least one of the following three international agreements on Human Rights: the Council of Europe's *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms* (1950); the United Nation's *Universal Declarations of Human Rights* (1948) and the *Charter of Fundamental Rights* (2000) of the European Union. They all protect the freedom of expression and information.

Informally, this link is best described as a 'social contract': 'According to this view, media and journalism require democracy as it is the only form of government that respects freedom of speech, expression and information, and the independence of media from the state. By respecting and protecting these necessary freedoms, democracy fulfils its part of the social contract with the media and journalism. [...] media in general and journalism in particular [...] fulfil their part of the social contract by providing citizens with the information they need in order to be free and self-governing, the government with the information it needs in order to make decisions in the common interest sensitive to public sentiments, an arena for public discussion, and by acting as a watchdog against abuse of power in politics and other parts of society' (Strömbäck 2005: 332).

In contemporary democracies, the media do not only inform the citizenry (and their representatives) but they also conciliate and mediate between those who govern and those who are governed. Therefore, the media are essential for the political, economic and cultural life in modern societies.

Despite this 'social contract', the relation between media and democracy is not necessarily relaxed. A whole series of trends and media development issues challenge this relation: media concentration and the increase of media ownership power; hyper-commercialization and the 'tabloidization' of the press with less emphasis on the coverage of political issues; transnationalization and globalization of media business; disruptive digital technologies are just a few endurance tests for the relation between media and democracy. They will be discussed in more detail below.

Moreover, the scholarly discourse is controversial on the question of when democracy works best: while some argue that democracy works well enough when citizens pay attention to politics once things have evidently gone wrong (see Zaller's 2003 model of the 'burglar alarm' standard for journalism), others emphasize the importance of the unfettered Habermasian ideals of participation and public deliberation. In any case, it must be remembered that the relationship between media and democracy is a two-way street. General social, political, economic and cultural developments have always created the basic conditions, as well as restrictions, for the functioning of the media.

This scholarly discourse on representative and deliberative ideals of democracy accurately reflects the variants of contemporary understandings of democracy in the western world.

On the one hand, different models of democracy have developed over time, differing not only in legacy but also in the institutional set-up. On the other hand, media are expected to play different roles, according to these different models of democracy.

There is, however, some common agreement on the role of the media in democracies, whatever model is concerned. Following McQuail (2009) these roles can be summarized as follows (see also Trappel 2011):

- The monitorial role addresses information provided by journalism to the general public. People need and require orientation, and journalistic information should be able to provide points of reference.
- The facilitative role covers all aspects of the provision of a deliberative public space. Journalism should promote active citizenship by way of debate and participation by adopting an advocacy role. One important aspect is the focus on minorities, marginalized groups and cultures rather than on mainstream reporting.
- The radical role ‘focuses on exposing abuses of power and aims to raise popular consciousness of wrongdoing, inequality, and the potential for change’ (McQuail 2009: 126). This role is almost genetically embedded in journalism’s duties and often depicted as ‘watchdog-role’. It is radical in the sense that such journalism has the potential not only to raise awareness for any kind of abuse of power, but perhaps also to mobilize resistance or protest.
- The collaborative role refers to the collaboration between the media and the state, for example during times of crisis or states of emergency. This role may at first reading be contradictory to the notion of freedom of the press in democratic societies. But McQuail (2009: 130) points out that the collaborative role ‘[...] is often only a more transparent and accentuated case of what goes on much of the time.’

While these basic roles are generally accepted, their importance and significance vary according to different models of democracy.

Models of democracy and the function of the media

What media are expected to deliver under the ‘social contract’ largely depends on the governing model of democracy. Democracy is not a clear-cut political concept, although there are a number of common characteristics. A European Union High Level Group suggests minimum common denominators: ‘A fundamental principle of democratic systems is that equal rights are accorded to all citizens, with the possibility of their direct or indirect participation in collective decision-making, especially through free elections, the choice of political representatives and the power to hold elected officials accountable’ (High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism 2013: 10).

This short description attempts to unite two traditions or models of democracy (Held 2006). *Civic republicanism*, rooted in the French Revolution and represented in the writings of

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is based on ‘each citizen’s commitment to a civic culture that transcends individual preferences and private interests’ (Glasser 2009: 94); *procedural liberalism*, in contrast, is more an Anglo-American concept with John Locke and Thomas Hobbes as its early proponents. Liberal democracy in this tradition can be conceptualized as ‘essentially procedural mechanism designed to facilitate the expression of individual preferences’ (Glasser 2009: 94). Both traditions refer to the same two basic constituents: liberty and equality.

While *republican democracy* is further subdivided into several categories (see Table 10.1), *liberal democracy* is described in political science theory as rather uniform. For good reasons, scholars characterized this model of democracy as ‘elitist’ (Baker 2002: 129ff).

Elite democracy assumes that the complexity of modern society overcharges ordinary citizens to follow all fields of political activities (for details, see Lippman [1922] 1997). Expert knowledge is required for decisions on common issues concerning the entirety of society (and even broader, increasingly also global society). Only properly educated or otherwise qualified decision-makers possess the competencies to make informed decisions on behalf of the rest of society. Too much democracy may lead to wrong decisions and must be avoided by applying mechanisms and procedures that minimize the dangers of majoritarianism (Nieminen 2016: 11).

According to C. Edwin Baker, in an elite democracy the ‘responsibilities of the press are minimal but crucial’ (2006: p. 113ff). The media are essentially society’s watchdogs of ‘accuracy, honesty, and investigative zeal’ (Baker 2006: 114). Furthermore, the media is assigned the mission to activate voters in order to increase political stability. From a critical viewpoint, it can be said that in an elite democracy, the media is instrumentalized to provide systemic legitimacy.

Table 10.1: Models of democracy, roles of citizens and roles of the media.

	Main actor(s)	Role of citizens	Role of the media
Elite democracy	Social elite groups (political, economic, cultural); experts	Non-active voters	Passive conduit of information
Republican models			
Pluralist democracy	Elected representatives	Informed citizens making informed choices	Informative and interpretative (objectivity); accountability
Participatory democracy	Organized citizens (interest-based organization)	Active participants in civic organizations	Advocacy; organizer of critical debate on social issues
Deliberative democracy	Informed and active citizens	Participants in public deliberation	Facilitator; platform for public deliberation on common issues

Source: Adapted from Nieminen (2016: 15).

Pluralist (or competitive) democracy is based on the understanding that, due to the increasing complexity of society, the only way to govern society is to have all interests represented in decision-making processes (for details see Dahl 1991). To balance these competing interests, they should be represented in relation to the size of their supporters. Representation of interests takes place in the form of political parties, trade unions and other kinds of civic associations. Decisions are usually negotiated compromises based on majority rules between elected representatives, who are accountable to their constituencies or voters.

Media are expected to organize public debates to the degree that citizens (members of interest groups) are able to instruct their representatives on matters to be decided. Thus, media inform citizens about matters of their interest, organize the public will-formation among citizens and offer representatives a platform to interpret the common will into political claims for negotiation (Nieminen 2016: 11).

Participatory democracy reflects the notion that '[d]emocracy becomes what all citizens make of it. Democracy is the result of the attitudes and the actions in ordinary life among ordinary people' (Strömbäck 2005: 336). It is understood that modern society has grown too complex for elites or elected representatives to steer and govern it, therefore, citizens should participate more directly in decision-making. The aim of participatory democracy is to increase the active participation of ordinary citizens and reduce the power of experts and professional politicians.

The role of the media is perceived as assisting citizens with civic activities. The media should aim at empowering citizens to help them organize and act for themselves; they should actively instruct audiences and give voice to different experiences. The role of the media and of journalists revolves around advocacy: the media is expected to act in a way that educates citizens and empowers them to act on their own behalf (Nieminen 2016: 12).

Deliberative democracy is based on the assumption that the increasingly complex processes of democratic societies could be greatly improved if will-formation and decision-making were founded on public deliberation instead of the opinions of the elite and elected representatives. These deliberative processes should be arranged as open as possible to all. Issues of strategic importance should be thoroughly debated among all those affected, with the end result of such public deliberation respected by decision-makers. Only matters of implementation of chosen policies or of a pragmatic nature should be left to elected representatives and public authorities (Nieminen 2016: 13). However, concepts of deliberative democracies have been criticized for being unrealistic and even unequal, as the distribution of prerequisite communication skills tends to follow social hierarchies (Dahlgren 2006: 31).

The role of the media is to provide platforms for deliberation and to facilitate the deliberative process. Media are essential in framing social issues and presenting alternative arguments for the public debate. Additionally, the media should challenge the decision-makers to respond to the results and conclusions of deliberation. Media should be 'fair-minded participants' (Strömbäck 2005: 340) and are assigned the roles of facilitators and advocates.

Media and democracy: European history

Liberal democracy cannot be thought of without the media. Historically there is an inseparable connection between democracy and the media, as what we understand today as a democratic political system can only emerge on the condition of freedom of speech implemented through the media. Although modern parliamentary democracy was adopted in most European countries from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries onwards, the basic elements for the emergence of public culture, which are elemental for liberal democracy, started to develop much earlier (see Habermas 1992: 14–26; Keane 1991).

We can separate several stages in the slow development towards modern day democratic society. One of the first signs of the birth of modern Europe was the development of the newspaper press in the seventeenth century. With it, the power of public opinion started to emerge (Habermas 1992: 89–102). Newspaper press became the central instrument of the rising European middle classes in their political mobilization for overthrowing the old feudal rule: ‘Until the middle of the nineteenth century, in both America and Britain, “liberty of the press” functioned as a bold and infectious utopian notion. It helped to put the wind up the governing classes. It dramatized the state’s restrictions upon freedom of expression. It fuelled the struggle for civil rights and political democracy, and familiarized reading publics with such vital subjects as constitutional reform, the need for representative institutions, and the subordination of women, slaves and others’ (Keane 1991: 28).

Bourgeois revolutions did not, however, result to the immediate establishment of democratic order in its present form, which is based on universal suffrage and a parliamentary form of government. In many countries it took another hundred years of political struggle to establish a pluralist democracy. The early press, however, was institutionalized as a commercial enterprise with profit goals (on the British experience, see Curran and Seaton 2003: 5–108).

In the next period, from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries, the media – first the newspaper press, later broadcasting – served the European nation building process. This was also the main period of political press: different political and ideological factions mobilized their supporters into public contestation for public opinion and popular support. The national public sphere started to form, uniting warring social and political factions for the common aim, the creation and solidification of the nation state (see Eley 1992; Scannell and Cardiff 1991: 3–19). In several European countries, this development took another direction in the early decades of the twentieth century and resulted in authoritarianism and dictatorship. In these countries the media (like other public institutions) were subjected to instruments of dominant ideology and governmental propaganda.

After the Second World War, another phase opened. In many countries, the slow decline of the political press had already started in the early decades of the twentieth century (first in the United Kingdom). The political press’s decline finally gained momentum and led to a slow disappearance of party-related newspapers in most European countries. By the 1980s, papers affiliated to political parties had lost most of their earlier significance. Independent,

non-partisan newspapers, the so-called forum press, expanded. In contrast to the political press, which had depended heavily on the financial support of political parties, the new independent papers were partly financed by advertisements, subscriptions and single copy sales. The media turned into an industry; a condition for the success of the media was their talent to sell audiences to advertisers. The media served two causes: on the one hand, they had their basic social and democratic function, informing citizens of matters of common concern; on the other, they entered the marketplace expecting to make profitable business (see Curran and Seaton 2003: 72–108).

Parallel to the growth of the print media industry, another development took place in the realm of the emerging electronic media. Because of its strategic importance in the after-First World War Europe – from military, as well as from ideological-political viewpoints – radio broadcasting was appropriated by the state and established as a public service. As the United Kingdom was the earliest to do so (1927), many countries followed the BBC example. The European broadcasting ethos transferred from radio to television after the Second World War, adopted the famous definition of its tasks by John Reith, the then Director-General of the BBC: to inform, educate and entertain national audiences. It was essentially the relentless abuse of the media as propaganda tools by totalitarian regimes during and after the Second World War that resulted in the post-war insight that broadcasting should firmly remain under public control, equally distant from the state and from vested private interests. In their more developed forms, the public service principles have been applied into national broadcasting legislation in most European countries (Open Society Institute 2005; Harrison and Woods 2007).

In the 1990s, in the seminal Amsterdam Protocol (1997), Public Service Broadcasting philosophy was adopted as an essential part of European cultural policy. It states that the provision for the funding of Public Service Broadcasting is within the competence of European Union Member States ‘insofar as such funding is granted to broadcasting organizations for the fulfilment of the public service remit as conferred, defined and organized by each Member State, and insofar as such funding does not affect trading conditions and competition in the Community to an extent which would be contrary to the common interest, while the realization of the remit of that public service shall be taken into account’ (Amsterdam Protocol 1997).

The two different European media policy regimes – the one emphasizing the democratic function of the media and the other underlining more the industrial and commercial aims – can today perhaps be seen clearest in the realm of European television policy. Powerful industrial forces have long attempted to narrow down the role of the Public Service Broadcasting and to reduce it to cover only such contents which are not commercially viable or interesting for mass audiences, such as educational, religious and minority programmes, as well as educational children programmes (see, for example, ACT 2009). Despite this long-standing campaign, the supporters of the Public Service Broadcasting have at least until today been successful in defending the basic ideals of the Public Service Broadcasting, with political reference to the Amsterdam Protocol.

Historically, we can discern three different dimensions in the relationship between the media and democracy: political, economic and cultural. Most research has concentrated on the political dimension; however, today the dimensions are ever more difficult to separate from each other. In what follows, we will first discuss these dimensions one by one and then we will create a general overview of the field.

Media and politics

Media's role in – and for – democracy has traditionally been defined from the point of view of news media and journalism. There has been much less discussion of the potential effects of other media forms to democracy, such as diversion, advertisement and different cultural contents. The newspaper press was already elemental in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the building processes of European democracies. Catchphrases such as 'the press as the fourth estate' and 'the watchdog of democracy' have their origins from these times. In modern democracies the media play no less central a role, although the division of labour between other social and cultural institutions is much more complex today.

According to the democratic ideal, media's function is, first of all, to *inform the citizens* on the whereabouts of public life. The function is that of servicing citizens with relevant and objective information on common matters, which is a prerequisite for critical and reasoned public debate, leading to public opinion and common will formation (the 'freedom principle'; see Trappel and Maniglio 2009). This first function is closely related to the freedom rights, in particular the right to expression and the right to get informed. The media therefore act as trustees for this fundamental civic right. With it, however, comes an increased level of public accountability. Media cannot interpret their freedom of expression as absolute freedom to act in their own interest.

Research supports the argument that media are essential for information and thus knowledge for the population. In a comparative media study carried out in the United States, Britain, Finland and Denmark, the coverage of the core media on various issues and the level of knowledge of the population in each country were put into relation (Curran et al. 2009). Two of the countries had a strong Public Service Broadcaster (Denmark and Finland), one country had a dual system (Britain) and one country followed the market model in broadcasting (United States). It turned out that public service television makes news more accessible for the population, fosters higher news consumption and results in better knowledge of public affairs in the population. The survey data revealed that Scandinavians were best informed both on soft news and on hard (political) news, while Americans were the least informed (Curran et al. 2009: 14). The authors of the study conclude that 'perhaps the most significant result to emerge from this study is the low level of attention that the market-driven television system of the US gives to the world outside America and to a lesser extent to hard news generally. This lack of attention contributes to the relatively high level of public ignorance in America about the wider world and about public life in general'

(Curran et al. 2009: 22). Thus, media structures and media coverage have strong implications on public knowledge and thereby on the exercise of democratic rights.

Secondly, the media are expected to *monitor and control the power holders* on behalf of citizens – that is, they are supposed to act as the ‘watchdog’ of the government and other power holders (the ‘control principle’; see Trappel and Maniglio 2009). For this reason, it is necessary that the media should be independent from the government and other political forces, which might want to use the media to spread their influence (in the form of propaganda). Given the long tradition of the notion of the media exercising watchdog functions, it comes as no surprise that some consider this notion as ‘fossilized’. Curran (2007) rightly claims that the traditional watchdog argument requires journalists to expose the abuse of the authority of public officials. ‘While there is some merit in this argument, it can lead to an undue concentration on institutionalized political power, and the neglect of other forms of power – economic, social and cultural – that can also injure or restrict’ (Curran 2007: 35). Indeed, modern democracy has brought forth new centres of power, in addition to the state. The watchdog role of journalism, therefore, is extended in scope to all other realms of public life where powerful actors determine the life of others.

In fact, the watchdog role on non-state power holders is even more important as in many cases no other democratic control is built into the system. The global recession following from the crash of the US sub-prime markets in 2008 and 2009 provided ample evidence, not only for insufficient internal control within commercial banks, but also for insufficient monitoring and surveillance of powerful private companies by the state – and eventually by the media. Single journalists might be overcharged with such complex watchdog duties. ‘The watchdog role of the press is perhaps best viewed as mediating the investigative resources of a free society – its whistle blowers, dissenting elite members, civil society watchdogs, independent think tanks, and critical researchers – rather than acting as a substitute for them’ (Curran 2007: 37).

The third major function of the media is to *give voice to the citizens*, that is, to act as the creator of public opinion, which should then guide decision-makers and power holders to their actions (the ‘equality principle’; see Trappel and Maniglio 2009). This way, the role of the media in democracy is understood as being that of a mediator between the government (understood in a wide sense) and its citizens (informing citizens of the actions of the government and informing the government of the public opinion emanating from citizenry). This notion includes the heroic role of the media as mediators in society, giving voice to the voiceless and managing to conciliate through balanced journalism. Notwithstanding the importance of this mediating function, (commercial) media are probably more interested in conflict than in the search for compromise. Therefore, this function creates contradicting requirements. The contradiction can be overcome through the differentiation of the media, which are indeed not a single entity. Core media – such as television, national press and national radio – should report on divergent viewpoints and produce balanced journalism by supporting the rituals and procedures of the democratic system, while media outside the core sector could – and should – nourish the public debate through controversial positions and partisan coverage (Curran 2007: 39).

Media and economy

As mentioned above, most accounts on media and democracy have concentrated on the political dimension of the media, that is, the relation to the state and the government. The other main source and form of power, economic power, has not had an equal emphasis. There are historical reasons for this, as the European concept of democracy was shaped and established in opposition to the absolutist and authoritarian state in the nineteenth century. The media – and with it the demand for freedom of the press – represented at that time a radical political challenge to the old power and the social forces behind it. The main challengers to the old power were the liberal middle classes who were not only advancing their political but also their economic interests, exemplified by their demands for minimal state and free trade (*laissez faire*).

Only later, along with the advance of modern capitalism, did the dangers that corporate power posed to democracy start to be critically discussed. However, the basic concepts with which the debate is conducted are derived from the past (such as press freedom and freedom of speech), often used by oligopolistic media corporations against the attempts to curb their powers (see Curran 2000). The problem is that the media as an industry are – and have always been – a necessary part of the corporate world. Thus, questions concerning corporate influence and financial pressure to the media (e.g. in the form of ownership concentration) are more difficult to discuss than those concerning political influence and governmental pressure. Anthony Giddens (2003: 97) points to the fact that ‘the growth of giant multinational media corporations means that unelected business tycoons can hold enormous power’. In a similar line of argument, Werner Meier (2007: 77) identifies a problem for pluralism caused by media ownership concentration and argues that there is ‘a fundamental tension between, on the one hand, uncontrolled market forces and, on the other, the requirements of the kind of journalism which is compatible with democracy’.

Since the 1990s, there has been an increase in the number of voices criticizing the media’s growing commercialization as it is seen as a threat to democracy. It is feared that the ongoing trivialization of media contents is superseding ‘serious’ and quality journalism, at its worst, leading to the ‘dumbing down’ of audiences (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995). This may lead to the public’s weakening trust to democratic institutions, the symptoms of which can be seen in the declining participation in elections and general distrust in politics and politicians. Other scholars consider the change in the news agenda of political journalism that squeezes out hard news as an ‘appropriate reflection of a popular democracy in which human interest issues have a role to play [...]’. The blurring of traditional lines dividing the public from the private spheres is itself [...] a measure of the democratization of political culture’ (McNair 2009: 243). In our view, such reasoning underestimates the long-term adverse effects of citizens exposed to highly commercial and trivial news. The above quoted empirical research by Curran et al. (2009) demonstrates the importance of high quality news for the knowledge level of citizens.

John Keane concluded in his seminal book on media and democracy that ‘friends of the “liberty of the press” must recognize that *communications markets restrict freedom of communication* by generating barriers to enter, monopoly and restrictions upon choice, and by shifting the prevailing definitions of information from that of a public good to that of a privately appropriable commodity. In short, it must be concluded that there is a structural contradiction between freedom of communication and unlimited freedom of the market’ (Keane 1991: 89, original emphasis).

The need to counter-balance the corporate power in the media is as such nothing new. Historically, warnings against the excessive power of media monopolies were already raised in the nineteenth century (see Curran and Seaton 2003). Measures aiming at balancing the situation are first of all represented by the Public Service Broadcasting (discussed in Chapter 5 of this book), which is by definition supposedly free from commercial and financial dependencies. Another form of defending public interest is demonstrated by the system of public subsidies (discussed in Chapter 4 of this book) to non-commercial media, such as political press and community media (radio and television).

Media and culture

In most European countries, the media has had a major influence in defining the national culture: in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the newspaper press was elemental in nation building and in creating the public sphere necessary to integrate different social forces to the democratic process. At least as important has been the role of the Public Service Broadcasting in ‘creating the nation’ (see Scannell and Cardiff 1991: 13–17). Public Service Broadcasting is still being defined mostly in national terms, as even the names of the companies indicate: the BBC, ARD, RAI, etc. (see Chapter 6 of this book).

From the viewpoint of cultural democracy, the media principally fulfil two functions: in their role as public disseminators of information, they create a common symbolic sphere uniting their audiences for public debate; in their role as the facilitators of public opinion, they offer ways to different social and cultural groups to define and identify themselves as members of the national public. In this way, media mobilize different communities for negotiation processes where different interests and values can be commonly weighed (see Young 1996). There is a close correlation between political and cultural dimensions: for an inclusive political democracy to be realized, an inclusive common culture (or ‘civic culture’, see Dahlgren 2009) is required; on the other hand, the development of common or civic culture needs well-developed political democracy. Media’s role here is central: as European history shows, they can be used either to promote socially and politically divisive cultural function (nationalist and xenophobic purposes) or to facilitate pluralist, socially and politically integrative aims (multiculturalism and social pacification).

However, it is not only the political dimension that has an effect on the media's cultural function. In the last years, critical debate has (again) been launched on the harmful consequences of the media, especially on the non-controlled adolescent use of the Internet. In the first hand, the criticism is targeted against the commercial media and its recourse to ever more violent and explicit content, which is claimed to feed anti-social culture. The consequence, though, has been an increase in the demands for more social and cultural control, leading to new forms of policing of the Internet and to more supervision on the uses of social media.

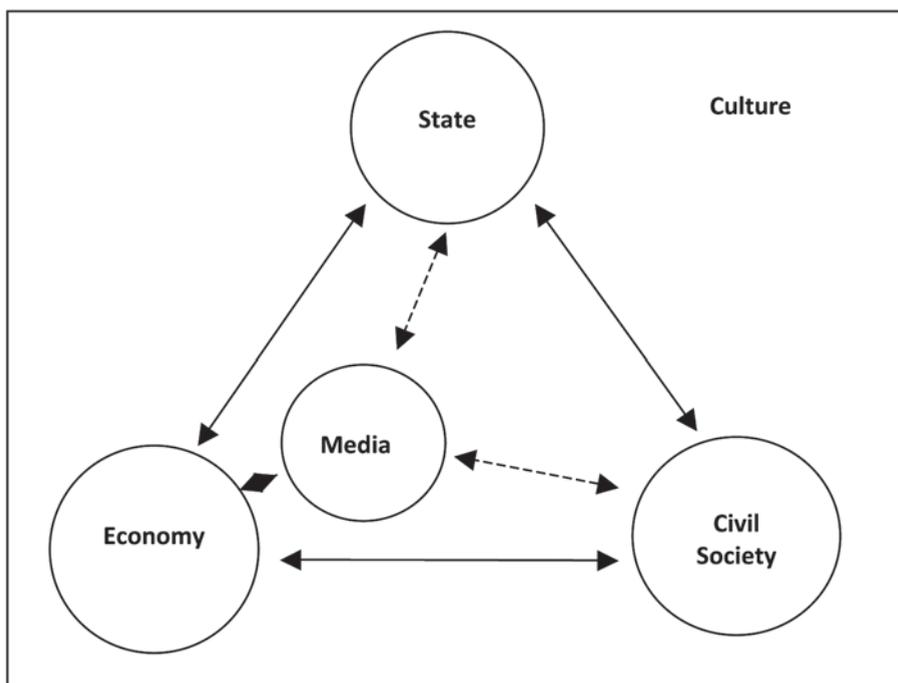
Political, economic and cultural framework

In order to connect the three dimensions discussed above, we attempt to clarify the concepts presented above and their mutual relations:

- Society is composed of three driving forces: the state, the economy and the civil society.
- In the European model of democracy the state exemplifies the entire political system, with the separation of powers into the legislative, executive and judicial departments.
- The economic dimension is symbolized and structures by the market are imperative. In its essence, the market is about the system of the exchange of goods, services and information, governed by supply and demand, within the boundaries of the legal setting; where the basic functioning principle of the state is 'public interest', in the economic dimension it is 'private interest' and the 'market'.
- Citizens are the prime actors in democracy, both as citizens in their relations to the state, and as consumers in their relations to the economy. In their everyday life citizens are organized in different formations of civil society, in the form of networks, associations, cultural and social groups, etc.
- The cultural dimension covers all other dimensions as it forms the overall historical environment and basic conditions for the functioning of both the state and the market.
- The media occupy the position in the centre of all these mutual relations, mediating communication between these institutions and attempting to safeguard their own independence, despite manifold (and increasing) pressures from each side.

These relations and the media's role are illustrated in Figure 10.1 (modified from Hamelink and Nordenstreng 2007: 226). The cultural dimension should be seen as forming the background for all the activities.

The position of the media, however, is unlikely to be exactly in between these forces in society. It is more realistic to consider commercial media closer to the economy/market corner, given their institutionalization as corporations (except public service and community media), the growing commercialization and growth of media conglomerates. Media closer to the state might be found in autocratic regimes, with the media close to the government



Source: Adapted from Hamelink and Nordenstreng (2007: 226).

Figure 10.1: Relations between State, economy, culture and civil Society.

and at a distance from economy and civil society. Finally, media close to the civil society are mostly found in the alternative, not-for-profit or 'third sector'.

Complicating factors

In recent years the role of the media has, if anything, become even more definitive from the viewpoint of democracy than in any time in earlier history. It has become ever more difficult to mark the line between the media and other major social and cultural institutions, as the media have such a central role politically and culturally. This can be seen in children's life, as they are exposed to different modalities of the media from their earliest stages of socialization; first through television, then through different computerized and mobilized media (mobile phones, social media, online contents) (Livingstone 2009). Our leisure time is more and more penetrated by the media (television, Internet, social media, etc.) and networked media also increasingly define our work life (Internet). The question can be posed, whether this increasing mediatization has also led to an increase in democracy in any of its dimensions – political, economic, cultural? Or, does it have any correlation to democracy?

One major complicating factor is the increasing transnationalization and globalization of political and economic institutions such as the EU, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Democratic media policy is caught in between: on the one hand, most media infrastructures, as well as media contents, are nationally defined and regulated (national markets, national languages, national politics), but on the other hand, transnational infrastructures and contents such as Google and Facebook are increasing with accelerating speed, especially promoted by the Internet and different modes of social media, with no transnational or global regulation holding them to account.

Another challenge for the relation of media and democracy are digital technologies that allow, on the one hand, for more democratic participation, but enable, on the other hand, anti-democratic practices beyond democratic control (see boxed text ‘Internet as democratizing force?’). At least three different and difficult problems need to be solved in this context.

First, digital infrastructures have been established to enable equal and universal access and use for all participants, allowing for capacity (and usage speed) to be divided equally (‘net neutrality’) (Kimball 2013). Business interests, however, are pushing for business models which allow for discriminating certain (commercial) services against others. The democratizing potential of the Internet would suffer from the dissolution of the net neutrality principle.

Second, copyright has been significantly affected by digitization and the advent of the Internet. Copyrights were originally conceived to create a balance between the private interests of intellectual property creators (e.g. writers, composers, singers) and the collective interests of society to make use of the work (Nieminen 2016: 24). Intermediaries were – and are – commissioned to exploit copyrighted work. By facilitating the multiplication (copy/paste) of such works digital tools have destroyed this traditional value chain with mixed results. While consumers enjoy wider access to copyrighted works that are (illegally) made available in the Internet, intermediaries and creators suffer from sharply declining revenues. Thus, ‘democratized’ creative works challenge the creators’ fundamental rights.

Third, one of the most complicated policy issues in the digital environment today concerns privacy. The confidentiality of private information and communication is the basic norm both in international law and in national legislation. However, the ways of defining and understanding what privacy is and by which means it should be protected are derived from the times of traditional communication technology (one-way communication such as print media, radio and television) using corresponding regulatory measures which matched the challenges of that time. The problem is, though, that the more communication has become digitized with increasing interactivity, the more difficult it has become to maintain the level of protection that we were accustomed to in the former media environment.

The basic challenge is that in the digital environment, media users can be routinely registered and their use of the media can be monitored. These registers create a vast network of data that is interconnected and the information can be used without the knowledge and consent of the individual media users. Often this data can be used – or this is the danger – in ways which are at least ethical and which are also potentially legally contradictory to the concept of protection of privacy as understood before the era of digital media.

On the one hand, information about our media use is an object of surveillance by security agencies. Particularly if we belong to a risk category (members of certain communities or networks; members of certain cultural or religious minorities; members of ethnic minorities), we are monitored and profiled (what we watch/read/write; where we are and with whom; with whom we communicate; what kinds of networks we are members of, etc.). Anything that appears to be out of the ‘normal’ range or seems unusual can be judged as suspicious and we might become subject to control measures – interrogation, detention or isolation – depending on what risk level we are judged to belong to. To be effective, surveillance must be invisible and conducted in secrecy; we are not supposed to know who and what monitors us and how the monitoring is done. Actions aimed at disclosing the means and agents of surveillance are taken as major breaches of national and international security and have severe consequences, as we have seen in the cases of WikiLeaks (Sifry 2011) and Edward Snowden (Greenwald 2014).

On the other hand, the information about our media use is increasingly gathered and used for commercial purposes and targeted marketing. A simple example is Amazon, who monitors our shopping habits and who, on the basis of this information, sends us automated personal offers of things related to our shopping habits and supposed interests. The problem appears when information drawn from multiple data collections is combined in order to create personal profiles of us, based not only on our shopping patterns but also on our Facebook updates, our networks of friends and family members, our blogs, our daily mobility and so on. Most of this data is available and we have disclosed it freely, without thinking of its being collected and cross-linked for commercial purposes. Our private and personal data has become highly valuable information for online businesses; it is a commodity that is sold and bought like any other. Does this create a problem? Yes, as far our personal details are used for purposes that are against our personal interests and values.

This is a problem that public authorities face today. While they are inviting and encouraging citizens to interact through their social media platforms (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram) and tools (Periscope), they support the commercial brands behind the platforms. This has at least two kinds of consequences. First, public institutions connect their services to commercial brands (for example, the BBC in cooperation with Facebook [BBC News 2016]; or the Prime Minister’s Office working side by side with Instagram [UK Prime Minister 2016]). Second, public institutions encourage citizens to voluntarily offer their personal information to be packaged and sold for commercial purposes. This is a dilemma that needs to be recognized, although there is no easy solution available.

Internet as democratizing force?

Since the Internet became available to mass audiences from the late 1990s onwards, the debate on its democratizing potential was launched. Indeed, there are convincing arguments that the Internet provides for more democracy. Firstly, the Internet gives voice to people who were deprived from any possibility of expressing themselves in public. Internet technologies enable citizens to express themselves on the Internet forums, or somewhere in the endless sphere of Web 2.0 applications. Secondly, the Internet provides citizens and journalists with additional sources of information. Thirdly, the Internet is highly useful for mobilizing people for any sort of cause. Elections campaigns in the United States (2008, 2012), in Iran (2009) and the so-called Arab Spring provide ample empiric evidence.

But there are also good arguments against empowering and participatory, thus against the democratizing performance of the Internet. Given the various gaps in access and use (for the debate on the digital divide, see van Dijk 2012), the Internet develops much less egalitarian than expected. Matthew Hindman (2009: 18) points to the fundamental difference between speaking and being heard and he concludes that in the Internet 'there are plenty of formal and informal barriers that hinder ordinary citizens' ability to reach an audience. Most online content receives no links, attracts no eyeballs, and has minimal political relevance'. Sunstein (2009) and Pariser (2011) both explicate the danger of 'filter bubbles' along Internet usage. According to Sunstein (2009: 5), in a well-functioning democratic system of free expression people should be exposed to materials that they would not have chosen in advance and they should have a range of common experiences. 'Unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself'. Andrew Keen (2015: x), finally, is particularly concerned about the social implications of the Internet: 'Rather than creating more democracy, it is empowering the rule of the mob. [...] Rather than fostering a renaissance, it has created a selfie-centred culture of voyeurism and narcissism'.

Thus, democratic experience after a quarter of a century of mass usage of the Internet is ambivalent. What has become evident, however, is the need to politically strengthen its empowerment potential and to limit its destructive potential by the entire civil society. Left to market forces alone, the Internet will replicate inequalities, social exclusions and power structures well known from the incumbent corporate media world, rather than create innovative, participatory and eventually democratic structures.

Democracy and communication studies

Academic research on the relationship between media and democracy has generally been based on normative assumptions of the role that the media should play in democracy. In the tradition of normative theories of communication, basic democratic principles are selected

and operationalized in order to measure how the performance of the media fits with the normative ideals. Although such criteria may vary, they usually include such issues as the freedom of the press, media pluralism, concentration of ownership, public access, etc. (e.g. the Media for Democracy Monitor, see Trappel et al. 2011); the selected criteria are then deployed in order to measure how the media reality fulfils the normative criteria. As stated above, only in recent years has the approach based on deliberative democracy gained ground among media scholars (see Christians et al. 2009). However, research on the quality of the media has picked up in parallel with growing concerns about the deterioration of journalism and journalistic output. Such studies focusing on the delivered editorial quality structurally refer to democratic values as normative yardsticks (for an example of news quality related research, see Fenton 2010).

Conclusion

Theories on the relation between democracy and the media always sail in the deep waters of the normative. Depending on the democratic tradition, the role of the media is defined as restrictive to the function of information, or as inclusive when embracing the notion of deliberation. Irrespective of which model of democracy is chosen for reflection, the media cannot maintain equilibrium between the state, the economy and the civil society. Therefore, the overarching democratic request concerns the media's accountability to the public at large. This requires a high degree of political and economic independence, respect and sufficient resources for journalistic practice, clear and predictable media regulation, a well-balanced composition of commercial and not-for-profit media, including media with a public service remit and sufficient financial resources available to media companies. Not each and every news website, television channel, radio operator or daily newspaper needs to live up to all these requirements, but the media landscape as a whole should adhere to these principles. If so, the old couple of media and democracy will optimistically walk hand in hand into our all-digital future.

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Note

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COMPARATIVE MEDIA POLICY, REGULATION AND GOVERNANCE IN EUROPE

UNPACKING THE POLICY CYCLE

EDITED BY

LEEN D'HAENENS, HELENA SOUSA, JOSEF TRAPPEL

Comparative Media Policy, Regulation and Governance in Europe represents the continuation and further development of a long tradition of media policy books by the Euromedia Research Group, focusing on the development of media structures and media policy within Europe. It provides a comprehensive overview of the current European media in a period of more or less disruptive transformation. It maps the full scope of contemporary media policy and industry activities while also assessing the impact of new technologies and radical changes in distribution and consumption on media practices, organizations and strategies.

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