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The MEDIA & POLITICAL PROCESS

ERIC LOUW

The Media and Political Process

Second Edition

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List of Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress (South Africa)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CNN	Cable News Network (USA)
coin-ops	counter insurgency operations
EU	European Union
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Force of Columbia
FLN	National Liberation Front (Algeria)
FRELIMO	Front for the Liberation of Mozambique
FRETELIN	Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IT	information technology
ITN	Independent Television News (UK)
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
NWIO	New World Information Order
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PACs	Political Action Committees (USA)
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PR	public relations
PRs	public relations professionals
PRC	People's Republic of China
psy-ops	psychological operations
SA	South Africa
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SWAPO	South West African People's Organization (Namibia)
UN	United Nations
UNITA	United National Army for the Total Independence of Angola
USA	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
UK	United Kingdom
WHAM	Win Hearts and Minds
WTO	World Trade Organization
ZANU-PF	Zimbabwe African National Union – Patriotic Front
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union

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ONE

Introduction

A core question for anyone interested in political studies, media studies or journalism studies is: 'What is the relationship between the media and politics in contemporary Western democracies?' Attempts to answer this question have given rise to the expanding field of Political Communication. This book aims to introduce students to some core themes and questions in Political Communication. Doing so will involve examining the following:

- The argument that there has been a substantial media-ization of Western politics;
- The growth of spin-doctors and public relations-ized politics;
- The relationship between media coverage and policy making;
- The evolution of political journalism;
- The way politicians have learned to use different media forms;
- How television has changed the nature of politics.

The Media and Political Process aims to introduce undergraduates to a range of themes associated with the notion that, since the arrival of mass communication, a particular kind of *image making* has grown into a central feature of the political processes of Western democracies. The book will argue that a core feature of mass democratic politics is '*hype* making'. Just as magicians use smoke-and-mirrors to distract their audiences and conjure up illusions, so too does the political machine and its media staffers. In today's Western democracies, television is the primary (but not exclusive) vehicle for this smoke-and-mirrors show. This show involves four sets of players: politicians-as-performers; the **spin industry**; media workers (journalists, presenters/hosts and researchers); and their audiences. A fifth set of players are policy makers – but they tend to remain backstage; shielded from as much scrutiny as possible by the smoke-and-mirrors show. A core aim of this book is to unravel the *symbiotic relationships* between journalists, spin-doctors and politicians within contemporary *televisualized politics*.

The book will argue that **demagoguery** has become a core feature of twentieth-century Western politics, with politics now characterized by a range of demagogic arts geared to *steering mass public opinion*. These demagogic arts will be described and analyzed.

The book is also about describing how contemporary mass audiences increasingly experience 'steered' politics as a set of *secondhand media images*, projected into

their lives by the media, especially television. Nimmo and Combs (1990: 18) liken this contemporary secondhand experience of **media-ized** politics to Plato's prisoners in a cave (see Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 Plato's prisoners in a cave

In his *Republic,* Plato relates the tale of prisoners in an underground den, bound so they cannot turn their heads. They can see nothing that goes on around them, only the shadows of those things that the fire throws on the cave wall. When they converse, they give names to and talk about the shadows of things, thinking they are naming the real things and not shadows. Suddenly one prisoner is released. The objects that produced the shadows are passed before his eyes. He is perplexed. He thinks the shadows he formerly saw are truer than the objects shown to him. Compelled to look at the piercing light of the fire, he turns away from the objects to the images on the wall. The shadows are clearer than the objects, again more real. Finally, hauled out to the sunlight, slowly the prisoner adjusts to seeing the objects for what they are. Yet pushed back into the cave, blinded by the sudden darkness, he sees even less than his fellow prisoners who were not released. The prisoners conclude it is better not to ascend to the light and vow to kill anyone forcing them to do so.

In this regard, the book is about exploring the following questions, namely – is the televisualization of politics transforming politics into a set of dancing 'shadows' which flicker through our lives, and which possibly hide more than they reveal? Have we perhaps become prisoners of an electronic cave? Are the secondhand televisualized images of politics we now receive:

- An accurate 'reflection of reality' (a mirror)?
- A blurred and skewed reflection (Plato's shadows)?
- The result of demagoguery which carefully crafts the images we get to see?
- The result of a complex media-ized 'construction process' involving journalists, spin-doctors, politicians, public opinion pollsters and audiences.

THE MEDIA AS 'A MIRROR'

In liberal democracies mainstream journalists are trained to be 'objective'. Objective journalism is solidly grounded in an empiricist understanding of the world (see Box 1.2), i.e. journalists have been taught to believe that:

- News exists 'out there' in the 'real world';
- This news exists *independently* of media organizations and journalists;
- The journalist's job is to *find* this news;
- Having found the news the journalist must record it *objectively* – i.e. ensure there is *correspondence* between what is described in the story and the world 'out there';
- Journalists are expected to eliminate their own *subjectivity* by applying routinized journalistic formulas (see Chapter 4).

Box 1.2 Empiricist understanding of the world

(This worldview also underpins 'objective journalism')

- A real objective world exists 'out there' independent of thinking subjects;
- Humans get access to this real world through their senses. Senses connect the 'inner world' (of thinking) to the 'outer world' of empirical reality;
- Knowledge of the world is achieved by carefully recording empirical regularities;
- Subjectivism must be eliminated from knowledge. This is achieved by building in 'controls';
- 'Good' empirical knowledge results from ensuring there is correspondence between what is described and the world 'out there'. This correspondence must be verifiable.

This mainstream model of liberal journalism believes that its practices result in stories that are an accurate reflection of reality – i.e. journalists believe they simply hold a mirror up to society, and describe it 'the way it is'. This notion of 'journalism as a mirror' has been disputed by **constructivists** (see Box 1.3) who have analyzed the media, e.g. Tuchman (1978). Tuchman argued that journalists actually *construct the news*, rather than reflect the news (see Chapter 4, Journalistic Practices). This constructivist view of journalism will strongly inform the arguments developed in this book (see p. 6).

Box 1.3 Constructivist understanding of the world

- Humans cannot passively receive inputs from the world 'out there' in the way cameras record images, because all incoming sense-data is processed by humans as thinking beings;

(Continued)

- All observation of the world is subjectively guided. Existing ideas (e.g. theory) knowledge, and experience (coded in our language-systems) structure the way we receive and interpret incoming data-inputs;
- Paradigms already in our head guide how we look at the world (e.g. the questions we ask and what we focus our senses upon) and how we process and interpret incoming sensory inputs. Hence people using different paradigms are effectively living in different worlds;
- Knowledge is the result of an internal (subjective) cognitive process – i.e. what we choose to think about; and how we choose to think about it (i.e. knowledge is guided by theories, ideas and experience already in our heads);
- So knowledge comes from where we choose to point the camera rather than a mechanical process of recording and it is our existing thoughts that guide what we choose to focus on. A significant determinant of our 'existing thinking' is how we have been socialized, and what we have already been exposed to via education and previously received media images.

However, the mainstream model of liberal journalism does acknowledge that an accurate portrayal of 'reality' (a mirror) is not always achieved. Although journalists strive to create an accurate *correspondence* between what is described in their story and the world 'out there', they do not always succeed. When it comes to political reporting this is blamed on the work of **spin-doctors** – i.e. demagogues who work to prevent journalists from finding all the 'facts'. Spin-doctors have become a convenient scapegoat. They are viewed as practitioners of the **dark arts** who work to obstruct objective journalists doing their job. And there is some validity in this portrayal. However, this portrayal is only half the story. The other half of the story is the role journalists themselves play in *constructing* a view of the world more akin to the shadows in Plato's cave than a mirror.

This book will argue that political reporting has indeed been PR-ized – i.e. spin-doctors have learned to 'steer' the portrayal of news. However, PR-ization involves a symbiotic relationship between a range of people, including spin-doctors, public opinion pollsters, politicians *and journalists*. The practices of objective journalism are implicated in the process of obscuration because spin-doctors have learned to use the practices of mainstream liberal journalism to help them *construct* the view of the world they are trying to portray. The shadows in Plato's cave are constructed – and it is spin-doctors and journalists working symbiotically who construct them.

Journalists have every right to criticize the way spin-doctors try to alter the shadows projected onto the cave wall. Journalists are correct to be skeptical. The problem is that journalists are not skeptical enough – they only focus their skepticism on others, never on themselves. This book will suggest that skepticism needs to be focused on journalistic practices themselves, and journalists need to focus more on their own roles in constructing images that are so often obscurations.

BEING SKEPTICAL

This book will deliberately examine the processes of political communication with a skeptical and jaundiced eye. Its focus will be liberal democracies and the media practices associated with liberal democratic political systems. This focus should not be taken to mean that liberal democracy is viewed as a form of governance especially deserving of criticism. The critical approach of *The Media and Political Process* can just as easily be applied to other forms of governance. Liberal democracy has simply been focused on because it has arguably become the most important form of contemporary governance. (For anyone interested in reading a deconstruction of Soviet-communist governance from a critical and skeptical perspective paralleling in many ways this author's approach, see Bahro, 1981.)

The Media and Political Process proposes that we increasingly inhabit a world of second-hand televisual images that increasingly naturalize 'the way things are'. Skepticism demands that we pay serious attention to *how televisual images are constructed* so that we 'de-naturalize' them. In this regard, it is important to constantly ask ourselves what the cameras are pointed at; what they are not pointed at; and why? In essence, this book can be seen as an attempt to point the cameras in new directions. As Kuhn (1970) has noted, asking different questions produces different knowledge (see p. 6). In the same way, shifting the camera angle changes the view of the world we are presented with. This book is deliberately geared to provoking critical thinking about televisualized politics in liberal democracies. Consequently, the book will be deliberately provocative as a way of metaphorically shifting camera angles that we increasingly take for granted. In adopting a critical approach, this book is not attempting to construct 'a truth'; rather, it is attempting to provoke discussion through a series of expositions grounded in *critical theory* and *constructivist* thinking. The book hopes to create skeptical readers of the media by revealing something of the symbiosis that has grown up between spin-doctors, journalists and politicians. In this regard, it was noted earlier that journalism is a skeptical profession. But it was suggested that journalists are not skeptical enough, because they focus their skepticism on others, but never on themselves. With this in mind, it is hoped that readers of this book not only will develop skepticism of mediaized politics, but also will be skeptical of this book itself. It too has been *constructed*.

TOWARDS A CRITICAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Plato's shadows in a cave are helpful when thinking about political communication. However, in our contemporary era we need to revise the picture of the cave. Today it is not shadows that are the problem. Instead, there is a television screen attached to the back wall of the cave that receives highly constructed and mediated images of the world beamed in from outside. The pictures are not fuzzy and shadowy; indeed they are crisp and clear and colorful. But that does not necessarily make them accurate reflections of any 'reality' outside the cave. They are just as problematic as the shadowy images in Plato's cave; perhaps more problematic because they now look so 'real'.

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This book will propose that we should be highly skeptical about televised pictures, and skeptical about the people and organizations that make them. We must ask critical questions like:

- Who constructs these televised images?
- What are the interests, biases, worldviews and agendas of those who make these images?
- Do the work practices of all those involved in making these images in any way skew the pictures we receive? If so, how?

In essence, we must not accept these televisual representations at face value. Rather we must be clear about how and why they were made, and how they almost certainly portray a partial and skewed view of the world. Instead of uncritically looking at the picture on the screen, we should be thinking about the camera, the cameraman, the cameraman's boss, the journalist's bias, the journalist's boss, and the spin-doctors who seek to influence all of this. We must start to think critically about what the camera is pointed at. Why has it been pointed at this? What is behind the camera that we are not getting to see? What is being edited out? By whom? And how does the journalist's or continuity announcer's voice-over change how we see the pictures? To what extent, and under what circumstance, do spin-doctors successfully 'steer' people? Why do so many people fall for the 'hype' and scripted 'faces' of manufactured celebrity?

What is being proposed is the deployment of a particular methodological approach, namely constructivism. With this in mind, we'll now take a brief digression to examine the constructivist approach.

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

Although constructivism is a theory of knowledge, it is especially well suited to understanding the processes of media-ized communication. Constructivism is a way of seeing and understanding the world based on the premise that as human beings we experience the world mentally – i.e. we relate to the world *through our minds*. Hence 'knowing' becomes an 'internal' (cognitive) process. For constructivists, it is our minds that structure the world for us by *actively engaging* in a process of '*construction*'. This stands in contradistinction to **empiricism** because empiricists argue that we know the world because our senses give us 'access' to the world 'out there'. For empiricists, we simply come to understand what is 'out there' by examining and studying it – hence, objectivists/empiricists seek to construct knowledge as corresponding to, or reflecting, reality (as in a mirror) (see Box 1.2). Constructivists, however, argue that we do not (and cannot) simply passively receive information from the world 'out there'. Instead, our knowledge of the world is actively built up (constructed) by a thinking subject (inside of our heads). This means our knowledge of the world is effectively *separated* from the world 'out there' – because it is based on an 'internal world' that is part of how the knower *experiences* his/her

environment. Hence the human knowledge of the world is inherently 'subjective', not 'objective' – i.e. we arrive at our understanding of the world by *interpreting* the world (see Box 1.3). Von Glaserfeld (1995) has gone so far as to propose that each human being constructs his/her knowledge of the world based upon his/her own selfish need to 'control' perception so as to make it conform to his/her own needs and end goals.

Constructivism can be traced back to two core thinkers – Thomas Kuhn and Lev Vygotsky. Kuhn (1970) saw knowledge as growing out of 'language communities' – i.e. *paradigms* (ways of seeing/knowing the world) arose from the questions that were routinely asked about the world. Because, for Kuhn, knowledge was the result of the questions one asked, if one changed the questions the knowledge base necessarily shifted. Hence knowledge/understanding was effectively constructed by a language community (framed by what questions it was deemed acceptable to ask, and the rules that guided how questions could be answered). Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) saw our minds as developing through language acquisition, which structured our access to the world. During the 1970s and 1980s, this constructivist thinking merged into cultural studies (which blended semiological analysis, neo-Marxist conceptions of ideology and structuralist anthropology) to produce a 'linguistic turn' in the humanities and social sciences. From this grew the post-structural turn, which views human knowledge as an ever-shifting series of contextually bound mental constructions (i.e. interpretations of the environment), rather than as any reflection of an external 'real' and 'knowable' world.

One danger inherent in constructivist thinking is that it can lapse into pure relativism. To correct for this, it is necessary that each paradigm develops a coherent set of criteria in terms of which it can 'justify' the worldview it constructs. Each paradigm needs to be able to justify its approach. This necessitates developing a self-reflexivity, an internal coherence, plus a consensus about the linguistic rules that apply within that paradigm. This provides some basis for selecting between different worldviews-as-constructions, i.e. not all constructions are equally good – some have more coherence and explanatory value than others.

TWO

Politics:

Image versus Substance

Chapter 2 examines:

- Core themes and concepts
- The media-ization of politics
- The difference between political hype and policy making

Politics is a phenomenon intimately bound up with the process of communicating because being a politician is an intensely social (communicative) occupation, engaged in by those who organize and regulate social power-relationships and make decisions governing the allocation and distribution of scarce social resources. Carrying out these roles necessarily involves communicating (about choices). This communication may involve direct face-to-face discussions, or it may be mediated through intermediaries like emissaries, soldiers or journalists. Political communication is a multi-dimensional multi-form phenomenon, e.g. speech, body language, memoranda, media releases and political violence. The spectrum of communicative possibilities is endless – including one-on-one deal making with colleagues/allies; negotiating with opponents; making promises to win support; making threats (often only implicit) that rule breaking will incur sanctions (e.g. imprisonment); and threatening, or unleashing, coercion and violence. To be successful, politicians must master this repertoire of communicative possibilities and learn to deploy the communicative form appropriate to the challenge being faced.

Politics may always have been a communicative art. The question is – did twentieth-century mass communication alter the nature of political communication?

WHAT IS POLITICS?

Resource scarcity has always characterized human existence, with no society (to date) able to satisfy the demands of all its members. This necessitates resource-allocation decision making – i.e. deciding who gets what; how resources and people

are organized; and who is licensed to take these decisions. Because such decisions produce winners and losers, mechanisms are also required to persuade people to accept the decisions (and the decision-making process itself), and/or enforce the decisions (on the losers). Further, since decisions affect people's life-chances (by impacting on who emerge as winners and losers), struggles ensue over who occupies key decision-making positions. Struggle also emerges over the values underpinning the organization-and-allocation of resources. So at its most elemental, politics is:

- A decision-making process;
- A struggle over gaining access to the decision-making positions;
- The processes of legitimating and/or enforcing decisions.

Legitimation is the dimension of the process most obviously involving the media. However, in contemporary liberal democracies, the media's impact on political processes has become much wider than simply a legitimation mechanism.

Considering the above processes of decision making, resource allocation, enforcement and legitimation has led to the building of five theories of 'what constitutes politics'. Each emphasizes a particular aspect of the overall process. Each has value.

Pluralist theory is probably the most important of the five because it has become so hegemonic and 'commonsensical' in **Anglo** political thinking that pluralism's core ideals are now simply assumed to underpin the very nature of liberal democratic governance. An influential pluralist theorist is Dahl (1967). Pluralists argue that power and influence are dispersed among a wide array of society's interest groups. These interest groups (as well as individuals) all actively promote their own interests. The sum total of this pressure group activity drives democratic political systems, and prevents one group from becoming a dominant ruling **elite**. Pluralism incorporates two assumptions:

- That an active citizenry exists, with all interest groups being equally active in promoting their positions. In reality this does not occur. Bennett and Manheim (2001) have suggested that the 'death' of this aspect of pluralism is a recent phenomenon – a 'death' brought about by the growth of 'strategic political communication campaigns' geared to manipulation. They suggest that strategic communication has produced a shift from pluralism to neopluralism (2001: 284). It is a moot point whether this is a recent phenomenon or not;
- That a wide array of pressure groups competes. In competition they 'cancel each other out', so no one group can become dominant. However, situations exist where demographics favor one group, leading to, for example, one-party dominant democracies (Giliomee and Simkins, 1999).

A second understanding of governance is *public choice theory*, advocated by Downs (1957). This is closely related to pluralism. Downs argues that the two primary drivers of the political process are the desire of politicians to stay in power and the self-interest of voters. This compels politicians to try to maximize 'good publicity' (push 'popular' themes) and minimize 'bad publicity' (hide or disguise 'unpopular' themes).

A third approach is *elite theory*. A well-known advocate of this was Mills (1959), who argued (in contradistinction to pluralist theorists) that the USA's political system was run by a minority of the population who functioned as a ruling elite. Theorists like Pareto (1968) and Mosca (1939) have gone so far as to suggest that the division of society into dominant elites and subordinate masses is a universal and unalterable fact of human organization. Others have argued that elites arise contextually. Dahl, for example, has suggested that a recent contextual 'obstacle' to pluralist democracy is the emergence of the 'control of information' by policy elites in contemporary Western societies (Entman and Bennett, 2001: 468–9).

A fourth approach is the *class conflict model*, advocated by Marxists like Lenin (1969). Marxists argue that conflict between capitalists and the working class is inevitable. Capitalists (the 'bourgeoisie') use 'the state' to advance their interests, repress working-class interests, and promote ideologies serving to 'disguise' class domination. The working classes engage in a struggle to end class domination and capture the state. A more recent theory of social conflict, with some parallels to the Marxist approach, has been developed by feminists arguing that males use the political system to advance their gender interests and repress women. Women engage in a gender struggle to overthrow the dominance of male patriarchy.

A fifth theory is the *state-centered approach* to governance developed by Nordlinger (1981). For Nordlinger, 'the state' is as much a political actor as any other interest group within the (pluralist) political process. Hence the state-as-actor (and bureaucrats, as state functionaries) will significantly impact on policy formulation.

Each of the above has explanatory power, but none individually provides a comprehensive understanding of the political process. Liberal-pluralists, public choice and state-centered theorists have focused on decision making and legitimation but have been less inclined to consider struggle and enforcement issues. Struggle and enforcement have dominated the class conflict approach. A comprehensive understanding of politics requires attention be paid to decision making, struggle, legitimation and enforcement.

Humans have, over time, devised a range of different mechanisms for staffing and organizing political decision making, enforcement and legitimation. This resulted in a diversity of political systems including tribal governance, monarchies, aristocracies, oligarchies, dictatorships and democracies. This book will focus on the Western liberal democratic forms, especially the varieties that evolved in the Anglo world.

Liberal democracy

Liberal democracy is not a neat or static model of governance; rather it is an ever-evolving set of practices and processes. At heart, the process involves a rule-governed competition over gaining access to power, holding on to it and using it to achieve social outcomes. Power is sought because power holders can ensure (through policy formulation) that resource distribution occurs in accordance with their interests and those of their supporters. Within liberal democracies one gains access to power by winning elections. This requires politicians to persuade large numbers of people to vote for them, which means engaging in a game of impression

management. For many decades this has involved impression management via the **mass media** – politicians and the political organizations underwriting them have to grab the attention of potential voters (in an increasingly cluttered media environment); hold their attention; and deliver effective messages in ever-shrinking timeframes (now often limited to five-second sound-bites). This dimension of politics is concerned with image making, **myth** making and **hype**, directed at a mass audience who are frequently only marginally interested in politics and often, passive citizens. If the active political players are successful at impression management and hype, they can cajole sufficient numbers of their passive mass-citizenry to vote for them and thereby gain access to the sites where substantive politics happens – i.e. policy-making sites and the levers of power for executing policy.

So, successful politicians must learn to work simultaneously within two parallel political environments (each governed by their own practices and **discourses**) – one involves hype making, imagery and mythology; the other involves substantive policy making. But because these two political 'worlds' (of policy and hype) have to be coordinated, politicians must also learn to work within a third dimension of the political process, namely a 'meta-world' where the political game itself is planned and managed (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 *The three dimensions of the political process*

	(1) Policy	*(2) Process management*	*(3) Hype*
The three dimensions of politics:	**'Elite' politics (geared to delivery)**	**'Elite' politics (geared to planning delivery and performance)**	**Mass' politics '(geared to image and myth making to be consumed by voters)**
Driven by:	• Cabinet • Policy staff • Bureaucrats • Judiciary • Intellectuals • Lobbyists • Diplomats	• Political party 'insiders' • Spin-doctors • Negotiators • Intelligence community • 'Insider' intellectuals	• Journalists • Culture industry • Pollsters • Pundits and media commentators
Output:	*Output as 'substantive'* • Resource allocation • Laws • Violence (internal) • Foreign policy (war and peace) • Service delivery	*Output as 'planning and coordination'* • Inventing beliefs and ideology • Inventing identity • Selecting politicians and staffers • Strategizing about 'policy' 'hype' and the 'policy–hype' relationship	*Output as 'image making'* • Politician as celebrity • Identities to consume • Belief and ideology propagation • Articulating interests • Legitimacy 'distraction' (if needed)

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