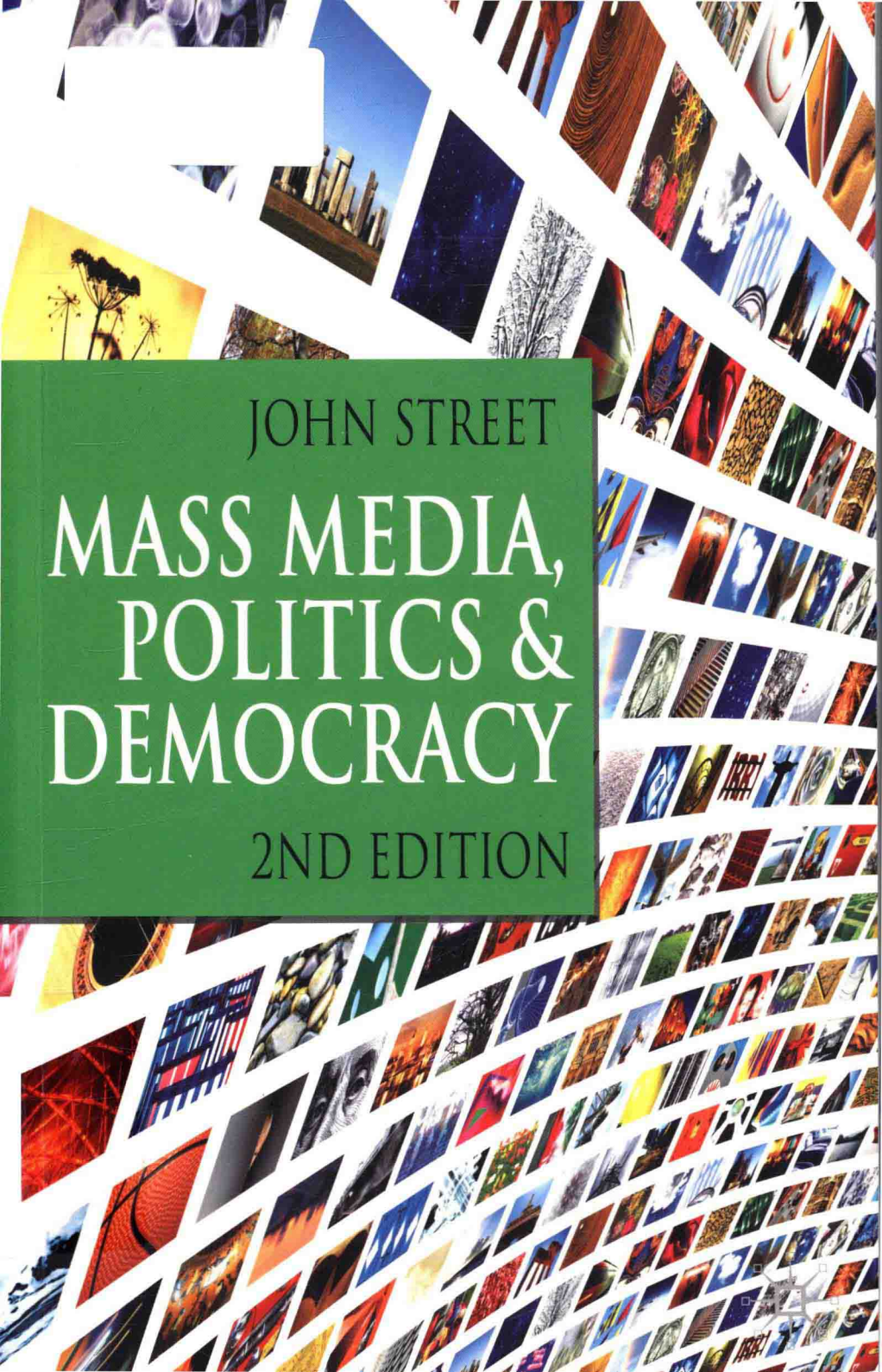

JOHN STREET
MASS MEDIA, POLITICS & DEMOCRACY
2ND EDITION

palgrave macmillan

Praise for the first edition:

'Stylish, readable and packed with telling examples from around the world, *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy* is wide-ranging in its coverage of different media and genres. In a world obscured by spin, soundbites and multivarious political conflict, John Street is an illuminating – and often entertaining – guide.'
– **Professor Douglas Kellner**, *UCLA*

The politics of modern societies are conducted through the media. Voters watch their leaders take part in televized debates. Protesters coordinate their actions through the internet and mobile phones. Governments communicate with their citizens through mass media and new media. To understand politics, we need to understand the media.

The revised and updated second edition of *Mass Media, Politics and Democracy* provides a systematic assessment of the representation of politics by the media and of media involvement in politics. Drawing upon international examples and contemporary events, it addresses the key issues of what the media tell us, who controls them, and what effect they have upon power and who exercises it. It asks whether the rise of celebrity politics has enhanced or diminished democracy. It looks in detail at the impact of media conglomerates on the circulation of power. And it asks whether new media are transforming political communication and political practice.

**John Street** is Professor of Politics at the University of East Anglia, UK.

ISBN 978-1-4039-4734-5
90101
9 781403 947345

Printed in China

Photograph: Ian McKinnell/Getty Images

www.palgrave.com

palgrave
macmillan

# MASS MEDIA, POLITICS & D

JOHN STREET 2ND EDITION

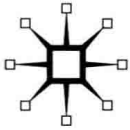
# Mass Media, Politics and Democracy

2nd Edition

**John Street**



palgrave
macmillan





First published 2011 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

Palgrave® and Macmillan® are registered trademarks in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and other countries

ISBN 978–1–4039–4732–1 hardback
ISBN 978–1–4039–4734–5 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11

Printed and bound in China

# Mass Media, Politics and Democracy

For Marian, Alex, Jack and Tom

# Acknowledgements

I owe thanks to a wide variety of people who have, sometimes unwittingly, contributed to both this edition and its predecessor: Nick Anstead, Sigrid Baringhorst, Michael Billig, Marian Brandon, Valentina Cardo, Stephen Coleman, John Corner, Ian Forbes, Marion Forsyth, Steve Foster, Simon Frith, Peter Golding, Andy Grantham, John Greenaway, Shaun Hargreaves Heap, Michael Harker, Sanna Inthorn, Mark Jancovich, Brian Loader, Lee Marsden, Anne Martin, Carla Moore, Alastair Mullis, Kate Nash, Keith Negus, Pippa Norris, Keith Povey, Alex Rousso, Roberta Sassatelli, Heather Savigny, Mike Saward, Alan Scott, Martin Scott, David Sinclair, Steve Smith, Mike Stephens, Hazel Taylor, Liesbet Van Zoonen, Frank Webster, Sally-Ann Wilson, Scott Wright, several anonymous reviewers and many generations of students at the University of East Anglia. I owe a particular debt to Steven Kennedy, Stephen Wenham and Helen Caunce at Palgrave Macmillan for their patience, persistence and wise advice, and to Susan Curran at Curran Publishing Services for copy editing. My family – Marian, Alex, Jack and Tom – have continued to provide the best possible distraction. The book is dedicated to them – again.

John Street

This book draws in places on some earlier articles by the author: 'In praise of packaging', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 1(2), 1996, pp. 43–55; 'Remote control? Politics, technology and "electronic democracy"', *European Journal of Communication*, 12(1), 1997, pp. 27–42; 'Prime time politics: popular culture and politicians in the UK', *The Public/Javnost*, 7(2), 2000, pp. 75–90; (with Alan Scott) 'From media politics to e-protest: the use of popular culture and new media in parties and social movements', *Information, Communication and Society*, 3(2), 2000, pp. 215–40; 'Celebrity politicians: popular culture and political representation', *British Journal of Politics*

*and International Relations*, 6(4), 2004, pp. 435–52; and 'Politics lost, politics transformed, politics colonised? Theories of the impact of mass media', *Political Studies Review*, 3, 2005, pp. 17–33.

# Contents

# Introduction

When the first edition of this book was published in 2001, none of us owned an iPod or an iPhone; there were no social networking sites like Facebook or video streaming sites like YouTube to occupy our time; we had not heard of Twitter or Wikipedia. Back then Barack Obama was teaching constitutional law at the University of Chicago. Yet by the decade's end, Obama was living constitutional law, having won the US presidency on the back of a campaign that deployed Facebook, YouTube and many of the other communications innovations that have become part of everyday life for many – but significantly, not all – citizens of the modern world.

The first edition of this book began with an anecdote about the musical tastes of the then candidates for the US presidency. George W. Bush, it transpired, liked Van Morrison, while his rival for the Republican nomination was a Frank Sinatra fan. Their Democrat opponent, Al Gore, went for Shania Twain. These apparently trivial choices were treated by the media as significant markers of character and style, and could be seen, in turn, as providing a telling insight into the way politics was changing; in particular, how the line between popular entertainment and political communication were becoming increasingly blurred. Few, though, would have predicted that Bush's successor as president would have one of his speeches reworked to a hip-hop beat, with guest vocal performances from the good and the great of the film, music and sports worlds, and that the resulting video would secure over 25 million hits. Few might also have anticipated that Arnold Schwarzenegger, star of Hollywood blockbusters like *The Terminator* and *Total Recall*, would be elected as governor of California; or that the rock musicians Bono and Bob Geldof would come to lead political movements which, they claimed subsequently, forced the world's most powerful figures to change their policy on third world debt; or that one of those world leaders would take time out to pose with a Fender Stratocaster guitar as part of a photo-opportunity, as

Tony Blair did. In this new world order, the rock and film stars played at being politicians, while the politicians pretended to be rock stars.

As such phenomena become increasingly familiar, we hardly notice them, let alone examine them. But only three decades earlier, no politician, and certainly no prime minister, would have allowed themselves to be pictured as the British prime minister was; and the only reason for a rock star to be on the front page of the newspaper would have been because they had died from a drug overdose or done something shocking (like swearing on television).

What the new order symbolizes is the way in which politics and modern mass media (in all its forms) have become ever more closely linked, with the result that it sometimes seems as if the form and content of politics are now dictated by those with media power and media skills. Why else would a moderately successful pop singer like Geldof come to be treated as the source of wisdom and insight on the plight of Africa? Why else would David Cameron, as the then newly elected leader of the British Conservative Party, allow himself to be cross-examined on Jonathan Ross's popular night-time chat show about whether, as a young man, he had entertained sexual fantasies about one of his predecessors, Margaret Thatcher?

There is, of course, much debate about what exactly is going on in such a 'mediatized' world, but the main focus of the discussion is whether politics is being 'transformed' by its contact with mass media. The traditional forms of political communication and the traditional sources of political power, it is widely suggested, are being reconstituted and reshaped. For some, it is for the worse (Lloyd, 2004); for others, it is for the better (Temple, 2006). For others, what we are witnessing is the emergence of 'post-democracy', in which the transformation of the media–politics relationship is but one element of a much wider set of changes. 'Post-democracy' is defined as a situation in which, according to Colin Crouch (2004: 6), 'while the forms of democracy remain fully in place ... politics and government are increasingly slipping back into the control of privileged elites in the manner characteristic of pre-democratic times'. In such a world, says Crouch, there is frequent 'recourse to show business for ideas of how to attract interest in politics', and political communication is increasingly simplified and sensationalized (2004: 28).