

MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY

James Curran

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Media and Democracy

Media and Democracy addresses key topics and themes in relation to democratic theory, media and technology, comparative media studies, media and history, and the evolution of media research. For example:

- How does TV entertainment contribute to the democratic life of society?
- Why are Americans less informed about politics and international affairs than Europeans?
- How should new communications technology and globalisation change our understanding of the democratic role of the media?
- What does the rise of international e-zines reveal about the limits of the Internet?
- What is the future of journalism?
- Does advertising influence the media?
- Is American media independence from government a myth?
- How have the media influenced the development of modern society?

Curran's response to these questions provides both a clear introduction to media research for university undergraduates studying in different countries and an innovative analysis by one of the field's leading scholars.

James Curran is Director of the Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre and Professor of Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. He has authored and edited numerous books, including *Power without Responsibility* (seventh edition, with Jean Seaton, 2010), *Media and Society* (fifth edition, 2010) and *Media and Power* (2002).

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To Cassie and Kitty

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Introduction

This book was commissioned as a collection of case studies, to follow my first volume of overview essays reappraising bodies of literature concerned with different aspects of media and power.¹ This first volume was reprinted several times and translated into five languages. This prompted me to reconceive this book as a more ambitious project. Eight essays (Chapters 1–8) have been written for it, leaving me with the problem of deciding which of the residue of earlier published essays I should select. The ones that survive the resulting cull include two (Chapters 10 and 11) that disappeared into a black hole of obscurity, virtually unread, in preference to more obvious choices (including one anthologised in four books and another cited in over 200 publications). I thought that I would give these two disregarded essays a second chance.²

Since many readers will dip into this book rather than read it from beginning to end, it may be helpful to provide a brief indication of its contents and identify the threads of argument that run through it. Media and democracy is one of the most intensively ploughed areas in media studies, resulting in a number of good books.³ There seemed no point, therefore, in going over the same ground or even synthesising what has been published, since this latter has been done a number of times – not least in an illuminating summation of media democratic theory that has taken leading scholars over a decade to complete.⁴

However, most books on media and democracy are either theoretical or grounded in the experience of one nation. So my point of departure has been to look concretely at the democratic functioning of the media in different contexts, beginning with America. The design of the American news media system is based on two assumptions. If the media are to be free from government, they have to be organised as a market, not a state, system; and if they are to serve fully democracy, they should be staffed by professionals seeking to be accurate, impartial and informative. The allure of this system, the soft power of its global attraction, is brought out in the opening chapter by contrasting the ideals and achievements of American journalism with the limitations of journalism in other countries, exemplified by cowed journalism in numerous authoritarian states, the fusion of media and political power in Italy and the irresponsibility of tabloid journalism in Britain.

This is followed by a chapter that takes a closer look at American news media. The shining city on the hill turns out to be less luminous when viewed from the inside. There is compelling evidence that American news reporting is, in some contexts, only semi-independent of government. The product of a very unequal

2 Introduction

society, American media tend to legitimate inequality, especially in their coverage of the poor. As the principal vehicle of costly, almost unregulated political advertising, American television also plays a pivotal role in sustaining the money-driven nature of American politics. These links between media and politics in America go largely unnoticed in the standard comparative map of media systems, whose validity is questioned.

The first two chapters thus laud and criticise American journalism. This leads to the third, co-authored, chapter (with Shanto Iyengar, Anker Brink Lund and Inka Salovaara-Moring), which compares the democratic performance of news media in the US, Britain, Denmark and Finland. Television in Scandinavian countries pays more attention to political and international news than does American television, which is one reason why Scandinavians are much better informed about these topics than Americans (with the British falling in between). Television in Denmark and Finland (and, to a lesser extent, Britain) also broadcasts more news at peak times than in America. This encourages greater inadvertent viewing of the news, contributing to a smaller knowledge gap between advantaged and disadvantaged groups. In short, Europeans are better informed about politics and international affairs partly because they are better briefed about these topics by their public-service television systems than are Americans by their more consumer-orientated television system (though there are additional, more important societal reasons as well).

The analysis of Chapter 3 can be challenged on the grounds that it is based on the conventional assumption that 'hard news' supports political knowledge. But surely soft news has a political dimension, once it is acknowledged that 'the personal is political'? More generally, the central argument mobilised in Chapter 3 – that hard news is being crowded out by entertainment in market-driven media – seems blind to the political meanings embedded in entertainment, which researchers in cultural and film studies take almost for granted.

Chapter 4 acknowledges the full force of the argument that media entertainment connects to the democratic life of society. It explores the way in which film and TV drama facilitate a debate about social values that underpin politics; enable an exploration of social identity (closely linked to a sense of self- and group interest central to politics); offer contrasting interpretations of society; and contribute to a normative debate about our common social processes – about how they are and how they should be. Thus, the television series *24* provided a catalyst for a national debate in the US about whether state torture was acceptable, while *Sex and the City* supported a collective conversation about the role and expectations of women at a time of rapid transition in gender relations. But although entertainment fuels democratic debate, a distinction needs to be made between fiction and journalism. This is because citizens need to be informed about important, real-life actions taken by their government – especially if this entails visiting death on another country. That more than a third of Americans thought in 2006 that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or a major programme for developing them at the time of the 2003 invasion, or that nearly half believed that Iraq was heavily implicated in the September 11 attacks, is an indictment of a society rendered politically under-informed by its dependence on a diet of entertainment. A democracy needs to be properly briefed to be effectively self-governing.

If media democratic theory needs to take account of the rise of mass entertainment, another necessary adjustment is to come to terms with increased globalisation. Global economic forces are rendering national government less effective than it used to be, and are in this sense diminishing democratic power. This is leading to attempts to build a multi-tiered system of governance, from the nation state upwards, which is seeking in effect to repair democracy in a global age. The evolution of the news media – still very heavily centred on the nation – is lagging behind this transition and making democratic repair more difficult.

Much theorising about the democratic role of the media is conceived solely in terms of serving the needs of the individual voter. But democracy consists not just of government and citizens, but also of a large number of intermediate organisations from political parties to public-interest groups. Attention needs to be given to how media systems should best support this infrastructure of democracy. This leads logically, it is argued, to recognising that different kinds of journalism – not just the disinterested, objective, factual model upheld in American journalism schools – can usefully contribute different things to the functioning of democracy.

Media and technology is the second node of this book. One of the hopes vested in the Internet is that it is forging a 'global public sphere' empowering international citizenry. Chapter 5, co-authored with Tamara Witschge, explores this theme by investigating a distinguished e-zine, *openDemocracy*, which gained an international audience in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The development of this web-based magazine illustrates the ways in which the Internet can facilitate innovative journalism. But it also points to the way in which the web is constrained by its context and time. Most of *openDemocracy*'s contributors came from the same parts of the world because they shared the same language. Contributors were overwhelmingly men, reflecting the cultural inheritance of unequal gender participation in political life. And they were mostly from elite backgrounds, because knowledge, fluency and time are unequally distributed in the external world, though this was exacerbated by the editorial values of the magazine. And despite gaining a substantial audience (approaching half a million visits a month at its peak), the e-zine failed to generate any significant revenue. The absence of a substantial stream of advertising and subscription revenue is limiting the development of independent web-based international journalism and its capacity to build genuinely global networks of communication (without some form of subsidy).

Chapter 6 looks at what was foretold in relation to British cable television, interactive digital television, community television and the dotcom boom – and what actually transpired. Forecasts were repeatedly, wildly wrong. In most cases, they originated from the business interests promoting new technological applications, were corroborated by senior politicians and admired experts and amplified by gullible media. These forecasts were also given credence because they accorded with a widely shared technology-centred perspective little influenced by economics and sociology.

An examination of past foretelling is followed, in Chapter 7, by a look at current predictions. There are four main – and mostly inconsistent – forecasts for the future of journalism: underlying continuity in a well-managed process of transition; a crisis of journalism that threatens democracy; a liberating Schumpeterian purge;

and a renaissance of journalism based on its reinvention. Each of these forecasts is for different reasons unconvincing. What seems instead to be happening is that the Internet is contributing to the decline and increased uniformity of old media journalism. This is not being offset adequately by new web-based start-ups because, in most cases, these have been unable to generate sufficient revenue to be self-supporting. The underlying problem is that journalism as a whole – online and offline – is being partly decoupled from advertising funding.

The third node of the book is concerned with media history. Media history has not made the impact on the interdisciplinary field of media studies that it should have. This is partly because media historians tend to address only themselves and subdivide media history by medium and period. As a consequence, the potential of media history to illuminate the nature of the broad connections between media development and societal change has tended to be lost. For this reason, I had earlier attempted to summarise alternative interpretations of the role of the media in the making of modern British society (with clear parallels to other economically developed countries) as a way of illustrating how history provides a gateway to understanding the present.⁵ In Chapter 8, I return to this topic by looking at recent research. The liberal interpretation – celebrating the winning of media freedom and public empowerment, linked to the democratisation of the political system – is beginning to be modified in response to radical criticism. The feminist interpretation, which argues that the development of the media empowered men at the expense of women, is responding to revisionists within its own ranks who emphasise that the media changed in response to the advance of women. The radical tradition, which views the development of the media in terms of containing working-class advance and consolidating elite domination, is urged to take account of reformist success. The anthropological interpretation centred on the role of the media in nation building is now turning to the role of the media in sustaining ‘sub-national’ consciousness. The libertarian interpretation charting the culture wars between moral traditionalists and liberals in the context of de-Christianisation indicates that liberals in Britain have been gaining the upper hand (though the outcome is clearly very different in some other countries). The populist interpretation that views the increased commercialisation of the media as a means of emancipation from a cultural elite, in a celebratory account of the growth of consumerism, remains influential, though perhaps not the force that it was. By contrast, the technological determinist interpretation, which sees successive new media as transforming the culture, social relations and sensibility of the age, has received a boost from the recent boom in Internet studies.⁶

The next two chapters focus on particular aspects of press history that have a wider resonance. The standard interpretation argues that the British press became free when it ceased to be subject to punitive taxation in the mid-nineteenth century and hails the politicians who campaigned for this as freedom fighters (albeit also with vested interests). Chapter 9 contests this by examining what these ‘freedom fighters’ actually said at the time. It shows that a major concern was to lower the price of newspapers and expand the press as a way of indoctrinating the lower orders. They were convinced that their version of enlightenment would prevail and, in some instances, that well-funded papers controlled by businesspeople and

favoured by advertisers would promote moderation. Furthermore, it is argued, they were right, partly because the shift from craft to high-cost industrial production of the press, and increased dependence on advertising, made radical journalism more difficult.

The next chapter examines the impact of advertising on the press during the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. It argues that the rise of advertising agencies as intermediaries, the development of evidence-based selection of advertising media and the rising incomes and advertising worth of workers all made it easier for radical journalism to make a breakthrough in the first half of the twentieth century. This said, advertising spending across newspapers was still very unequal, save for a brief period of newsprint rationing, because some readers had more money to spend than others, generated a higher advertising bounty and were worth more to publishers to recruit. This distorted the structure of the press, and its editorial strategies, in ways that disadvantaged the left. But this outcome came about in an unsought way and was the product of an impersonal economic process rather than of political discrimination.

In advancing this argument, I was influenced at the time by contending instrumentalist and structuralist interpretations of the state in critical political theory, and advanced in effect a structuralist interpretation of the influence of advertising on the press. But in the course of researching this essay, I became fascinated by the way in which the new business disciplines of market research and advertising media planning were developed by a motley but clever group of people. They changed the operation of the market by the way in which they reinterpreted it, in the process influencing the development of the press. Essentially the same process was at work when new ways of conceptualising and measuring the television audience, and of segmenting the market, in later twentieth-century America encouraged the growth of specialist television channels.⁷ These arguments accord with a new stress on the cultural construction of markets that is being developed in the sociology of the economy.⁸

The last node of the book is concerned with media and culture. Chapter 11 shows that book reviews in the British national press centre on literary fiction, history, biography, literary studies and politics. This excludes some books that are popular bestsellers and some that are important (in particular those concerned with science and social science). This idiosyncratic selection reflects the educational backgrounds of books editors, most of whom studied history or English at elite universities. Their predilections are reinforced by editorial tradition, their skewed teams of book reviewers and their social networks. Publishing executives are mostly content to anticipate books editors' preferences rather than to challenge them. The press can thus be viewed as a custodian of cultural tradition that entrenches a humanities domination of public and cultural life, while downgrading other disciplines as falling outside the core curriculum of what 'informed' people ought to know about.⁹ Little has changed since this research was done. More paperbacks are reviewed, but the neglect of science has become even more pronounced.

The last chapter reviews the development of British media and cultural studies during the last twenty-five years. The conventional way in which researchers narrate the field to themselves is to identify an inner logic in which gaps are identified and