

Chapter One Introduction

The End of Old Certainties and Paradigms in Political Communication

They say that everyone remembered what they were doing the day John F Kennedy was shot (22nd November 1963). I wasn't born yet but I do remember other such days: the day the Falklands/Malvinas conflict began (1982), images of the Berlin Wall being knocked down (1989), the multiple playbacks of two passenger airplanes crashing into New York's Twin Towers (2001), the collapse of Lehman Brothers (2008), and the growing tide of protestors in Egypt's Tahrir Square (2011). Each of these endlessly-reported events left observers with a sense of shock and disbelief, and a feeling that things would never be the same again.

For me, as with many others, two such days stand out in 2016. The first was after the British went to the polls to vote on continuing membership of the European Union on June 23rd. I woke up early in Amsterdam to get the result no-one thought possible just a couple of months earlier. Geert Wilders was on the radio promising that the Dutch would soon follow the British out of the EU. No-one in either the UK or continental Europe could predict what would follow. The second was the day US citizens voted for a new president on November 8th. I was chairing an event with Wolfgang Streeck on his new book (*How Will Capitalism End*). He confidently predicted a Clinton victory to the 300 or so in the audience, as had all but one of my 100 students in the lecture hall the day before. Again, no-one quite believed that the alternative of a Trump Presidency could ever happen. The same feelings of fear and the unknown quickly spread.

Both events did not simply produce freak outcomes. In multiple ways, they made the conventional wisdom about media and politics appear suddenly outdated. The large majority of academics, journalists, experts and pollsters all got it wrong. The winning campaigns tore up the tried and tested playbooks. The established parties were as much at war with each other as with their opponents. Electorates swung wildly and did not behave as they should. Mainstream media, now struggling for economic viability, was frequently distrusted or ignored by citizens. US and UK politics seemed to have suddenly fallen down a deep, dark rabbit hole.

The historical upheaval was not just an Anglo-American problem, to be linked to those nations' neoliberal policy frameworks and first-past-the-post electoral systems. Countries across Europe, with different political and economic systems, were also throwing up erratic results. Parties which had dominated for decades were virtually wiped out. In 2015 the radical left party Syriza won power in Greece. In 2017, Macron's fledgling En Marche! beat Marine Le Pen's Front National, edging out France's traditional main parties to win the Presidency in France. The 2018 Italian election resulted in a new governing coalition of the populist Northern League and Five Star Movement parties led by Giuseppe Conte, a lawyer without parliamentary experience. The Dutch and Germans experienced elections where mainstream parties lost substantial ground and took many months to form fragile, uneasy coalition governments. Far right, populist and extremist parties have been on the rise across Europe, from the newer democracies of the East, to those seemingly more stable nations of Northern Europe and Scandinavia.

Change and uncertainty could be seen everywhere else too. In 2017, moves began for the impeachment of presidents in South Korea, Brazil and South Africa. In 2018, Lopez Obrador won the Presidency in Mexico with another fledgling party. Populist leaders consolidated their holds on power in Japan, Turkey, China, India and Russia. A new world order was emerging

as US power waned. Other nations, notably China and Russia, who offered their own brand of authoritarian capitalism, began challenging the liberal cosmopolitan vision of globalisation. Democracy watchers recorded clear democratic declines across the globe for the first time in decades.

It is these various signs of historical upheaval which have given me the impetus to write this book. In early 2016, having taught political communication for the best part of two decades, I felt confident in engaging with a clear set of theories and debates. Suddenly, as I began teaching the new cohort that Autumn, the discussions and arguments I had set out and participated in now appeared increasingly redundant. The subject text books, even recently published ones, looked to be describing a past era (my own included). Debates around professionalised parties set against ideologically-driven ones now seemed less relevant after Donald Trump's victory. Discussions of the steady mediatization of politics appeared confused when mass, legacy news outlets were going bust everywhere. Traditional media effects research looked redundant when so much of the population got their news in scraps from social media and elsewhere.

The lectures were packed with new students wanting to work out what was happening and where it was all leading. Each week, they and I began charting new territories, still unsure as to what the final destination looked like.

What was becoming clear was that several long-prophesised tipping points had finally been reached. Traditional left-right political spectrums were no longer the clearest means of identifying or cohering a party. The legacy media of the public sphere was dying. Social media was rapidly reconfiguring the basis on which politics and journalism operated. Electorates were more volatile than they were aligned. Economics and economic policy-makers no longer seemed to be describing real economies. Parties began looking more like new social movements. Meanwhile, pollsters and forecasters appeared to be as reliable as astrologers. No-one could tell the difference between an 'expert' and a propagandist. And all the while, national publics were increasingly fragmenting into ever more polarized echo chambers.

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Outline of the Book

Part one introduces the core concerns and parameters of the book. **Chapter two** sets out different ways through which we might think about what 'good' democratic political and media systems might look like. It skirts through philosophers and democratic theorists from the French Revolution, Dewey and Lippman to Jurgen Habermas, as well as setting out more recent comparative systems work. It asks: are the tensions inherent in democracies, between liberty and equality, representative and direct democracy, becoming too difficult to reconcile?

Chapter three looks at the question of crisis in politics and media in 21st Century democracies. As with previous periods of such talk the discussion becomes one of whether we are experiencing a worrying break-down in democracy or merely a period of unnerving change. Should we frame what's happening now in terms of Blumler's 1995 'crisis' book or his 1999 new 'age' article? How are the great disrupters of globalisation, neoliberalism and new ICTs, reconfiguring democratic governance and, perhaps, making it untenable?

Part two focuses on the formal institutions and actors of political systems: parties, news media and government institutions. **Chapter four** traces the evolution of political parties and election

campaigning, as ideologically-driven parties first became mass, catch-all organisations and then electoral-professional entities. In this shift, ideological direction and clearly aligned constituents were balanced off against professional campaigning and technocratic governance. Are such debates still important when traditional ideologies are riven with fault lines and professionalised parties neither trusted nor stable?

Chapter five turns to traditional news media operations. Even though the internet has powerfully disrupted the legacy news environment, it still plays a major role in institutional politics. Thus, long-running debates between political economists and liberal sociologists, about whether or not legacy news media have retained their autonomy, fourth estate and 'truth'-seeking values, remain important. However, as the business model of national news production collapses, do both positions still hold any relevancy?

Chapter six explores the evolving literature on media-source relations. Such dynamics are fundamental to political communication, whether politicians and journalists are cooperative or in conflict, and whether media is overly-managed by states or, vice versa, politics is becoming overly mediated. However, what happens to such relations when both parties and media have become increasingly precarious, fragmented and populist in nature?

Part three turns away from formal politics and institutions to cover media effects, public engagement, interest groups and new social movements. **Chapter seven** looks at citizens, unpacking two related discussions on political participation and media influence. The first re-evaluates the literature on why publics are participating less in formal politics. The second, skips through varied phases of effects research alternating between 'strong' and 'limited' paradigms. Both discussions find their way to a similar conclusion. That is that in the UK and US, publics are gravitating towards three general groups: two polarized and ghettoized but engaged factions, and a third increasingly disaffected and disengaged group that has turned its back on mainstream media and formal politics altogether.

Chapter eight moves on to civil society, interest groups and the policy process. It asks what kind of groups and organisations are able to influence government legislation and media content most often and why. Long-term debates have focused on conflicting accounts of insiders and outsiders, resource-rich and poor, and varying opportunity structures. These perspectives have now become overlain by two key developments: the rise of fast-emerging and moving new social movements, and the growth of powerful elite intermediary professions (lobbyists, accountants and lawyers). Together, they are expanding the space between public, visible politics and private, shadowy policy and regulation.

Part four explores the big disrupters of democratic political communication. **Chapter nine** begins with the economy, often regarded as the most important voting issue and point of ideological division between left and right parties. Since the 1980s neoclassical economics and neoliberalism have increasingly come to dominate systems of national economic management and global governance. However, a series of problems for developed economies have been exacerbated by the financial crash of 2007-08. Hard economic realities now suggest such forms of capitalism are threatening democracy itself, yet few alternatives are emerging.

Chapter ten concentrates on the latest waves of digitally-facilitated political communication. Classic fault lines, between techno-optimists and pessimists, technological determinist and social-shaping approaches have been played out in investigations of parties, news organisations, interest groups and individual participation. While optimists have been

confronted with a harsh reality check, pessimists have been forced to admit the depth of the changes confronting the political communication environment. The anarchic, wild west of a public sphere emerging suggests that democratic media theory needs an urgent rethink.

Chapter eleven introduces and melds diverse literatures on globalisation and international political communication. In recent decades, advocates have argued that globalisation has stabilised and improved the economic fortunes of nation states, more than making up for the losses of state sovereignty. Likewise, enthusiasts have linked the new international communication infrastructure to an ideal vision of cosmopolitanism and an emerging global civil society. However, while transnational communication continues to expand in multiple ways, social, economic and political trends have not followed the expectations of the global elite. As a consequence, there is a public backlash against globalisation, a lack of faith in Western-style free-market capitalism and democracy, a new cold war and a break-down of international cooperation.

Chapter twelve pulls together the findings of the previous chapters. It concludes that we have both entered into a new age of political communication, and that democratic systems are indeed in a state of crisis rather than simply change. Too many key institutions of democracy – in theory and practice – are struggling to survive and fulfil their basic functions. In which case philosophers, scholars and political actors need to go back to first principles, rethinking the norms, institutions and practices of modern, representative democracies.