Book Review

Stephen Coleman & Karen Ross:
The Media and the Public: "Them" and "Us" in Media Discourse
West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell. 2010

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In recent years, several political communication scholars have pointed out that many countries in the West are experiencing simultaneous crises regarding public communication and democracy. With the publication of *The Media and the Public*, Coleman and Ross (2010) could be conveniently listed among the recent and important contributors to these scholarly discussions. They clearly identify this "glaring paradox of contemporary democracies": even though people have more opportunities today than in the past to "question their rulers; challenge official information; contribute to mainstream media; produce their own media and speak for themselves", there are still widespread reports of people "feeling distant from elites; ignored by the media; unheard by representatives; constrained in public speech and utterly frustrated by the promises of democracy" (p. 154).

Why is this so? How can this paradox be remedied in such a way that the general public feels represented in mediated discourses? What are some of the democratic benefits, challenges and options for the media to give the public a "[...] media voice in a corporate-dominated mass communications environment" (p. 85)? What or who constitutes a "public" to begin with, and who can speak as and on behalf of the public? These, in essence, are some of the major questions which Coleman and Ross address theoretically, empirically and prescriptively in terms of policy proposals to further the democratic role of the media.

In modern societies where all forms of public communication tend to be mediated (p. 29), the public, according to Coleman and Ross, is indeed a "[...] complex entity that is forever spoken for and addressed but rarely witnessed on its own terms" (p. 122). By examin-

ing in detail how the public, which is often a "product of representation", is "both reflected, constituted, represented and reconfigured" through processes of mediation (p. 28), Coleman and Ross critically discuss different ways in which different media have tended to construct and represent the public (as a social group) and publicness (as a social space). In particular, they examine the different ways in which the public's voice is "managed in and through the media" (p. 45).

Beginning with a critical discussion of mainstream media's management of public voices, Coleman and Ross argue that in mainstream news media, in particular, "mediated public voice is managed in countless ways", such as, editing, marginalisation "as background noise" or confinement to "banal sound bites" (p. 45), in ways that "leave active citizens with something to say feeling like outsiders trespassing upon the sanctity of official communication spaces" (p. 139). Even in cases where the public is physically allowed onto mainstream media spaces for purposes of "audience participation", the terms of their mediation still remain "off limits" to them (p. 48) and these, according to Coleman and Ross, clearly fall short of "basic norms of democracy" (p. 63).

Given the above shortcomings and the tendency for relations between mainstream media and the public to be marred by a "fundamental asymmetry of power" in favour of the former (p. 71), much hope has been placed on alternative media to serve as spaces for "public and counterpublic expression" (p. 71) in a way which curtails or ignores "traditional media's gate keeping proclivities" (p. 77). However, after critically examining the extent to which five forms of alternative media constitute channels of counterpublic representation, Coleman and Ross argue that aspirations about alternative media have always exceeded reality, which is marked by a "precarious financial basis" (p. 77) and the tendency for such media to reach only small sections of the public (p. 41).

In the wake of the shortcomings of mainstream and alternative media to democratically represent the public, much hope has been placed on the Internet as having a strong capacity to enrich "the pluralism of the public sphere" (pp. 91-92). Rather than merely dance to the tunes of uncritical digital enthusiasts, Coleman and Ross critically examine the "rhetoric of e-empowerment" and "digital" democracy (p. 94) and conclude that although the alteration of existing information ecologies, thanks to developments in digital technology, constitute "pluralistic cracks in the edifice of centralized news production", the "balance of informational power" has not swung "away from elites" (p. 100). Most people, as Coleman and Ross point out, still receive their news from mainstream mass media rather than blogs for instance and combined with issues like the visible digital divide in access and skills terms, these constitute grounds to be "more sober about the Internet's contribution to publicness" (p. 117).

To the extent that mainstream mass media are still so central when it comes to democratic publicness, how can "public service communication", in particular (p. 129), work towards more accountable democratic openness? Coleman and Ross identify at least four major challenges which these media will have to tackle to achieve this aim, amongst which

are the challenge to provide the tools, skills and content that will allow the public to "[...] make sense of one another; witness themselves and their lifeworlds and connect public deliberation on matters of common interest and concern" (pp. 128-129). To accomplish these tasks, media organisations, according to Coleman and Ross, need to effect significant institutional changes; be promiscuously inclusive (p. 138) and adopt a "cosmopolitan sensibility" which repositions the media to be "open to the world and its diverse modes of experience" (p. 137). This "openness" further warrants the respect of a barrage of ground rules as to how mediated democratic deliberations ought to take place (see pp. 140-141 for a discussion of these ground rules).

In general terms, and for political communication scholars in particular, there is very little new or surprising empirical or theoretical discussion to be found in *The Media and the Public*, but this does not dilute the strength of the book as a well-written and important summarised update and reminder of the challenge for the media to "[...] translate democracy into a vibrant, inclusive and multi vocal experience" (p. 148). Written in an easy-to-read manner and splashed with distinctively laid-out examples and extracts of related empirical research, the six chapters by Coleman and Ross speak to a diverse but related community: students, academics, media practitioners and even policy makers.

The decried crisis of public communication and democracy in Western democracies is one which, according to some scholars, is both fanned (if not caused) and could be "fixed" by the media. With their provocatively polysemic "us" versus "them" title, Coleman and Ross arguably see the media in such a light. That could explain, for instance, the heavy responsibilities which they throw on the media, in particular, to create contexts for the public to "[...] witness itself in terms that are pluralistic, sensitive, tolerant, confident and consequential" (p. 7).

Acknowledging that they are "[...] asking a great deal of the media" (p. 153), Coleman and Ross end their book by arguing that the "moral task" of "democratic media" is to facilitate public meetings "across distances of space, history and affect in ways that allow the word 'us' to be used as broadly and unthreatingly as possible" (pp. 152-153). In what reads like a direct plea from "us" (the public) to "them" (the media), Coleman and Ross pleadingly request the media to among other things:

> Help us encounter one another as real people. Enable us to meet other publics and enter other spaces that have been too easily and casually invisible in the past. Acknowledge and reflect the countless deliberations, conversations, whispers and silences that constitute an already existing public dialogue about who we are and what we want. And ensure that publics are able to speak for themselves, calling to the attention of others, making themselves understood and arriving at common judgments about their own interests (pp. 153-154).

Although Coleman and Ross from the very beginning of their book declared that their aim was to "[...] start and add debates about the relationship between the media and the public rather than produce a manifesto" (p. 4), reading the quotation above, they have arguably

succeeded to do both: eloquently contributing to the debate and outlining – if not a manifesto for democratic media – at least its framework.

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