

Book Review: *Performing Politics: Media Interviews, Debates and Press Conferences* by Geoffrey Craig

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*In **Performing Politics: Media Interviews, Debates and Press Conferences**, Geoffrey Craig examines media interactions between politicians and journalists as power struggles that have come to be seen as crucial in indicating the potential success and competence of political leaders. While the book understands politics through largely conventional terms that bypass the emergence of newer political movements, it nonetheless serves to promote greater literacy and understanding of contemporary political communication and the battlegrounds therein, writes Mithilesh Kumar Jha.*

***Performing Politics: Media Interviews, Debates and Press Conferences*. Geoffrey Craig. Polity. 2016.**

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Media – electronic and print as well as social – plays a major role in contemporary politics, not just in ‘orchestrating’ but also in shaping public and political discourse. It has radically altered the ways politicians interact and communicate with the public, and also how the public itself participates in such conversations. Geoffrey Craig’s *Performing Politics: Media Interviews, Debates and Press Conferences* critically examines processes of political communication and classifies the places and occasions where these interactions take place as a site of struggle between journalists and politicians. His is a fascinating study of how politicians and journalists, while speaking in the name of ‘the public’, are actually engaged in a power struggle, and how for politicians these interactions turn out to be a platform for performing their leadership styles and substantive visions on various social and political issues.

We are increasingly experiencing our politics and political discourses as being shaped by media. A disconnect has emerged between the masses and their representatives, and audiovisual, 24/7 media houses and channels have gained enormous power by acquiring the middle space between the two. To a great extent, the increasing ‘presidentialisation’ and ‘individualisation’ of politics is the net outcome of this culture. The public standing of politicians is greatly dependent on their coverage by the media: in other words, their presence in media spaces matters more than their actual connection with the people. It turns out that encounters between politicians and media elites and journalists are more to do with ‘style’ and ‘performance’ than the conventional role of media to interrogate politicians and hold them accountable. This book is a welcome addition to understanding this phenomenon in our public political life.

In fact, in these interactions, Craig argues that we frequently witness a discursive struggle between politicians and the media for the maximisation of their own individual power while simultaneously invoking the ‘concerns’ of the public. With the rise of social media and new trends such as including a ‘studio audience’ to represent ‘ordinary people’, we do get a sense of ‘people’s participations’ in these encounters. However, we also know that these opportunities to participate, ask questions or intervene are still determined by the news anchor. Hence these events are seen by many as ‘controlled’ or ‘orchestrated’, and therefore put a challenge before politicians across the political spectrum: to engage smartly, intelligently and with some degree of openness and flexibility. How they perform and are seen through these interactions does matter. *Performing Politics* therefore seeks to seriously engage with the questions raised by the different genres of encounter between journalists and politicians.

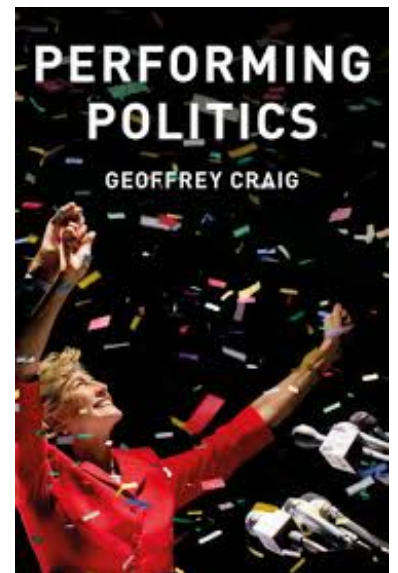




Image Credit: The Great Debate, Wembley Arena, London, 21 June 2016, BBC Broadcast (Democracy International CC BY SA 2.0)

The book is divided into seven chapters, and the author begins by examining the emerging trends of what he calls 'mediated political performances'. Using critical discourse analysis, he goes on to consider the suitability of concepts including Pierre Bourdieu's 'habitus' and Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of language to understand the subtleties of the language, bodily gestures and non-verbal communications used by the politicians in political and more relaxed celebrity-style interviews, leaders' debates, press conferences and current affairs television formats. Considering politics mainly as a discursive phenomenon, Craig interestingly examines what he calls the 'dialogic nature of language and agnostic nature of democratic politics'. Politicians now not only have to embody the principle of being open and flexible enough to connect with a range of issues across the political spectrum, but also of being competent at demonstrating their own standing and differentiating their own views from that of their opponents. Performing such tasks before a 'live audience' has become a real test for many politicians.

One tends to agree with Craig's assertion of political interviews as one of the occasions where tough interrogations of politicians by journalists are possible, and that the power to dominate the interactions between the two becomes most visible as both claim to represent the 'indeterminate' public. It is also interesting to observe that gradually it is the relaxed celebrity-style interview with more focus on the leader's personal life that has attracted larger audiences; politicians moreover tend to exploit such interactions to present the human side of their character and generate more emotional support. Yet, no matter what the type of media interaction is, politicians must demonstrate their political authority as well as their individual character and personality. They must deploy political rhetoric in particular ways and identify themselves with the people to generate trust in their leadership. Chapter Four identifies the skillful deployment of such tactics by liberal democratic leader Nick Clegg in the first leader's debate on ITV before the UK 2010 General Election as a very good example of understanding how these performances have shaped the public trust (even if Clegg would later lose the trust of the electorate due to perceived policy betrayals).

While the book aims to explain the discursive terrain and power struggle during the interactions between the 'political field' and 'media field', readers may nonetheless question how far these are separate. Aren't the two interlinked? For example, *Performing Politics* is conspicuously silent about how the 'media field' itself is controlled by the big corporations. With so much explicit bias and prejudice displayed by the media houses, how far can they be examined as *fair* actors in these interactions? And does this question not fall within the domain of politics?

Another point that might be confusing to many is the title of the book – *Performing Politics*. At a time of great

disenchantment with traditional structures of politics and power, many may expect the book to deal with newer political dimensions and actors in the form of the various protest movements that are emerging across the globe and altering the domain of 'conventional politics'. Contrary to this, the book's subtitle, *Media Interviews, Debates and Press Conferences* (not mentioned on the cover page) suggests that the text concerns the ways that politicians engage with the media and how they specifically *perform* in these encounters. Yet, how correct is it to limit the performance of politics to media interactions? Of course, these shape the public image of a politician, but are they judged by media performances alone?

This book is nonetheless relevant in opening up and highlighting the emerging trends in political communications between politicians and journalists as well as how these media platforms are becoming increasingly important for politicians to make announcements and directly appeal to the masses, often bypassing conventional spaces for public political debates and scrutiny such as parliament. *Performing Politics* is also mainly successful in its objective to promote greater literacy about contemporary political communication and the power struggles therein; as the author believes, it will therefore 'lead to more cynicism but to greater public engagement'. One also needs to remember that 'trust' in the leadership is perhaps more important than 'truth'. In fact, it is truth itself, as the author believes, that is now the 'battleground upon which political communication occurs'.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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