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Edited by

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

Thomas Hanitzsch

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Journalism and Democracy

Brian McNair

The histories of journalism and democracy are closely linked. The origins of journalism, as we recognize it today, parallel the turbulent birth of the first democratic societies nearly four hundred years ago. While the concepts of news, and the role of the correspondent as a professional dispatcher of newsworthy information, predate the bourgeois revolutions of early modern Europe, the modern notion of a political journalism which is adversarial, critical and independent of the state was first formed in the early seventeenth century, against the backdrop of the English Civil War and its aftermath. In that conflict, which pitted the forces of absolute monarchy against those in favor of democratic reform and the sovereignty of parliament, journalism played a key role (Conboy, 2004). It did so again during the French Revolution of 1789 (Popkin, 1991; Hartley, 1996), and also in the American War of Independence (Starr, 2004). Then, and since, the presence of a certain kind of journalism, existing within a functioning public sphere (Habermas, 1989), has been a defining characteristic of democratic political and media cultures. This chapter explores the role played by journalism in democratic societies, past and present, both from the normative and the pragmatic perspectives, and critically assesses its contribution to the development and maintenance of democratic political cultures.

JOURNALISM BEFORE DEMOCRACY—THE AUTHORITARIAN TRADITION

For the authoritarian feudal regimes of fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe, journalism was regarded as a useful if potentially dangerous instrument for more effective administration of, and control over, society. The capacity of information to upset and destabilize the authoritarian order of things was recognized from the invention of print in the late fifteenth century, by the monarchs of Tudor England as much as the Papacy in Rome. Early laws of libel, alongside restrictive licensing and copyright laws introduced in the late sixteenth century, sought to police information and neuter its potentially destabilizing effect on feudal power structures. The objective, as frankly stated in the first English law of copyright, was to prohibit, whether in journalism or other forms of printed public expression, “heresy, sedition and treason, whereby not only God is dishonoured, but also an encouragement is given to disobey lawful princes and governors.”¹ Foreign news was banned in England in 1632 on the grounds that it was “unfit for popular view and discourse” (Raymond, 1996, p. 13).

JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY—BEGINNINGS

The foundations of modern political journalism lie in the seventeenth century struggle between the monarchy and parliament which led to the English Civil War and subsequent progress towards democratization. Before these events journalists, like all in feudal society, were subjects of the absolute monarch, subordinate to the demands of church and state. Early periodicals such as *Mercurius Gallobelgicus*, launched in 1594, provided coverage of politics, military affairs, economic trends and the like, but always within strict restrictions on content imposed by the feudal state.

But as capitalism developed and the legitimacy of feudal power began to be challenged by a rising bourgeoisie, journalists started to take sides in the intensifying class struggle. As conflict between crown and parliament grew into civil war in 1640s England, controls on the content of the press were loosened, and titles proliferated in response to the rising demand for news and analysis. The news books of this period—forerunners of the modern newspaper—were more than merely reporters of information but “bitter and aggressive instruments of literary and political faction” (Raymond, 1996, p. 13). Journalists took sides, becoming partisans and activists in the shaping of political reality, as opposed to mere reporters of it.

In the 1640s, too, journalism formalized the distinction between news and comment, or fact and opinion, in the form of the *Intelligencer*, a publication in which journalists “mediated between political actors and their publics” (Raymond, 1996, p. 168). By the end of that decade, “the detailed reporting of news was concomitant with strong interpretation and passionate persuasion” (Ibid.). The publication in 1644 of John Milton’s defense of intellectual and press freedom, *Aeropagitica*, consolidated the emerging culture of critical, committed political journalism, and provided ideological legitimation for the early public sphere which it formed. Henceforth, there was growing demand for political coverage that was “free” from the restrictions of state and religious authority; the technological means of providing such coverage through print media; and growing numbers of literate readers, empowered as citizens and able to take advantage of this political coverage in individual and collective decision-making.

Following the execution of Charles 1 in 1649, there were many twists, turns and setbacks in the struggle for democracy in England, and universal suffrage was not achieved in advanced capitalist societies until the twentieth century, but by the early eighteenth century the principle of constitutional monarchy was established, a recognizably multi-party democracy was functioning, and a recognizably modern political media system alongside it. The first daily newspaper in English, the *Daily Courant*, appeared in 1703. Daniel Defoe’s *Review*, described by Martin Conboy (2004, p. 60) as “the first influential journal of political comment” launched in 1704. By then, too, the normative expectations of political journalism in a democracy had been defined. I will outline them here under four headings.

JOURNALISM AS SOURCE OF INFORMATION IN A DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Democracy, it is generally accepted, contributes to good government only to the extent that it is reliably and accurately informed, and that the choices made by citizens in elections and other contexts are thus reasoned and rational (Chambers & Costain, 2001). In practice, of course, many democratic choices are founded on prejudice and ignorance. People vote for all kinds of reasons, as is their democratic right, and not always on the basis of rational thought or careful deliberation. But from the normative perspective the democratic ideal is one of informed choice, to which the outputs of political journalism are key contributors. Journalists provide the information on which citizens will be able to judge between competing candidates and parties. Journalists must be, in

short, objective reporters of political reality, striving to be as neutral and detached as possible, even though they will hold their own political views. Partisanship in political journalism is permitted, but where it exists it should not pretend to be objective coverage, and should not crowd out of the public sphere the kind of detached, balanced reportage with which organizations such as the BBC, the *Financial Times* or the US TV networks are associated. As Peter J. Anderson (2007, p. 65) puts it in a recent study, “high-quality, independent news journalism which provides accurate and thoughtful information and analysis about current events is crucial to the creation of an enlightened citizenry that is able to participate meaningfully in society and politics.”

JOURNALISM AS WATCHDOG/FOURTH ESTATE

An extension of the information function of political journalism in a democracy is the role of critical scrutiny over the powerful, be they in government, business or other influential spheres of society. This is the *watchdog* role of the journalist, who in this context becomes part of what Edmund Burke called the Fourth Estate. In order to prevent the abuses which characterized the feudal era, journalists in democracy are charged with monitoring the exercise of power. Are governments competent, efficient, and honest? Are they fulfilling their responsibilities to the people who elected them? Are their policies and programs based on sound judgments and information, and designed with the interests of society as a whole in mind? In its capacity as watchdog, political journalism oversees the activities of our governors, on our behalf, and with our permission.²

JOURNALISM AS MEDIATOR/REPRESENTATIVE

The watchdog function of journalism is undertaken on behalf of the citizenry. In this respect, the journalist is cast as a mediator between the citizen and the politician, the former’s representative before power, who ensures that the voice of the public is heard.

This mediator/representative role can be performed in several ways. First, political media can give citizens direct access to the public sphere, in the form of readers’ letters to newspapers, phone-in contributions to broadcast talk shows, and participation in studio debates about public affairs (for research on these forms of participatory political media Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; McNair, Hibberd, & Schlesinger, 2003). The representative function of political journalism is today enhanced by the availability of fast, interactive technologies such as email, text messaging and blogging, all of which provide new ways for citizens to communicate with political elites and participate in public debate. These technologies have fuelled the development of an unprecedentedly participatory democracy, in which more citizens now than at any other time in democratic history have regular access to the means of political communication. But from the journalistic perspective, the essence of the representative-mediator role remains as it was when readers’ letters were the only practical form of participation in the public sphere for the great majority of citizens: to stand between the public and the political elite, and ensure that the voice of the people can be heard in the democratic process.

JOURNALISM AS PARTICIPANT/ADVOCATE

In the role of representative, the political journalist is positioned as advocate or champion of the people. Journalists can also advocate particular political positions, and be partisan with respect to

the public debate, seeking to persuade the people of a particular view. As we have seen, journalistic partisanship (as opposed to mere propaganda) dates back to the English Civil war, where journalists participated in, as well as reported on, the conflict between the decaying aristocracy and the ascendant bourgeoisie. In the eighteenth century, writes Conboy (2004, p. 90), “adversarial politics engendered a partisan and often acrimonious press”, while into the nineteenth century “the newspapers played an increasingly strident role in opinion formation and in the polarisation of popular political debate.” Ever since, political media have taken sides, albeit in ways which aim to preserve the appearance of objectivity and factual accuracy in reporting. Reconciling these apparently contradictory goals is possible in the context of the separation of fact and opinion which is a structural feature of political journalism in a democracy, and of the distinction which exists in many countries between public and private media.

JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY—THE CRITICS

The normative expectations of political journalism in a democracy, as I have set them out above, are generally accepted to be: *information* (reportage); *critical scrutiny* (commentary, analysis, adversarialism); *representation and advocacy*; *partiality* (as long as it is clearly signaled as such, and commentary is distinguished from fact). The pragmatic performance of the political media in fulfilling these functions has, however, been criticized for as long as they have existed, from both left and right on the ideological spectrum.

The Critique of Liberal Pluralism and Objectivity

The Marxian critique, developed in the nineteenth century and still influential in media scholarship around the world, asserts that “freedom of the press,” and the “bourgeois” notion of freedom in general, is essentially an ideological hoax, a form of false consciousness which merely legitimizes the status quo and distracts the masses from serious scrutiny of a system which exploits and oppresses them. The media are structurally locked into pro-systemic bias, and will rarely give “objective” coverage to anything which seriously threatens the social order of capitalism. The aspirations of objectivity, and of independence from the state, are masks for the production by the media of dominant ideology, or bourgeois hegemony, in the sphere of political coverage as elsewhere.

Marx and Engels developed this theory in the 1840s and after, in works such as *The German Ideology* (1976). It was then applied by the Bolsheviks to Soviet Russia, where journalists were required to renounce “bourgeois objectivism” and instead act as propagandists for the proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat in particular. The Bolsheviks developed on this basis an entirely different theory of journalism from that which prevailed in the capitalist world, and exported it to other states with Communist Party governments. The classic *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1963) set out the main differences between what it characterized as liberal pluralist theory on the one hand, and the authoritarian approach of the Communist-led states on the other (see *Journalism Studies* 3(1) for a retrospective on the *Four Theories* book). Though the Soviet Union is no more, the authoritarian approach continues to underpin the practice of political journalism in nominally socialist states such as Cuba and China. Journalism in these countries is institutionally part of the ideological apparatus of the state.

Comparable rationales to those traditionally adopted by the Soviet communists and their like-minded parties support the censorial media policies of Islamic fundamentalist states. In Saudi Arabia and Iran, for example, it will be argued that Islamic beliefs and truths are not reflected

in secular, liberal notions of pluralism and objectivity, and that CNN, the BBC and others are promoting ideologically loaded accounts of global political events which can reasonably be censored in favor of state-sanctioned journalism. Here again, as in Cuba or China, the demand is for journalists to actively support a dominant ideology imposed by the ruling political faction, albeit one based on religious affiliation rather than notions of class domination. The extent to which liberal journalism can contribute to the establishment and maintenance of democracy in these countries, and also in post-Soviet countries such as Russia which have tended to veer between the authoritarianism of old and the stated objective of building democracy and free media, has informed a sizeable body of research. Kalathil and Boas (2003) have compared the role of the media—and emerging technologies such as the Internet in particular—in eight countries, including China, Cuba, Singapore and Egypt. They conclude, as does Atkins' (2002) comparative study of the role of journalism in Southeast Asia, that “overall, the Internet is challenging and helping to transform authoritarianism. Yet information technology alone is unlikely to bring about its demise” (Kalathil & Boas, 2003, p. x).

In advanced capitalist societies, meanwhile, scholars such as Chomsky and Herman have argued consistently against the validity of liberal journalism's claims to freedom and objectivity, implicating journalists in the maintenance of a “national security state” propped up by propaganda and attempts at “brainwashing” no less crude, they would assert, than that pursued by *Pravda* in the old Soviet Union (Chomsky & Herman, 1979). Others use different terminology and conceptualizations of the media-society relationship, but the core notion that political journalism is less about democratic scrutiny and accountability of the political elite than it is a vehicle for the “necessary illusions” (Chomsky, 1989) which prop up an unequal and exploitative capitalist system remains prevalent in media sociology, shaping a large body of research concerned with documenting the ways in which journalism contributes to the reinforcement and reproduction of dominant ideas and readings of events. The period since 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have seen an upsurge in scholarly work of this kind, as in for example Philo and Berry's *Bad News From Israel*. This critical content analysis of British TV news concludes that in coverage of the Israel-Palestine conflict, Israeli views receive “preferential treatment”, and that there is “a consistent pattern on TV news in which Israeli perspectives tend to be highlighted and sometimes endorsed by journalists” (2004, p. 199). Although the BBC rejected allegations of systematic bias, its managers did accept that there was a difficulty in providing viewers of TV news, given the nature of the form and the limits on space, with the context and background required for making sense of current events. Similar controversies have surrounded public service journalism in Australia and elsewhere.

Other post-9/11 studies of news coverage of international politics include David Miller's edited collection of critical essays about news coverage of Iraq, *Tell Me Lies* (2004), and work by Howard Tumber, Jerry Palmer and Frank Webster (Tumber & Palmer, 2004; Tumber & Webster, 2006) which reaches less critical conclusions on the question of TV news alleged biases. A recent edited volume by Sarah Maltby and Richard Keeble (2008) explores the role of journalism in post-9/11 conflict situations from a variety of perspectives, both scholarly and practitioner-oriented.

Although the end of the cold war, and with it the global ideological division between communism and capitalism which dominated the twentieth century, has marginalized the Marxian critique of concepts such as pluralism and objectivity, the performance of the political media in the post-9/11 world continues to be the subject of debate and contention, with accusations of bias, propaganda and other deviations from the normative ideals of objectivity and balance being a regular feature of commentary by scholars, activists and also many journalists. The political media remain an arena of ideological dispute, not least on the issue of who—or which medium—

is telling the truth about political events, and whether such a thing as “objective truth” is even possible. There is bias, of course, in overtly partisan outlets such as Fox News and many newspapers, and this is usually apparent. As noted earlier, the blogosphere and online journalism in general have expanded the space available for opinionated, motivated journalism about politics to circulate, and this has encouraged at least some of the “old” media to wear their ideological preferences more overtly on their sleeves. On this all observers can agree, and choose their biases accordingly. On the deeper issue of political journalism’s independence from the state and the political elite, and its capacity to be objective, individual conclusions tend to be premised on one’s views about the nature of capitalism itself, its viability as a system, and the scope for serious alternatives. Believers in the fundamentally oppressive nature of capitalism, and its inevitable demise interpret journalism as part of the ideological apparatus without which it would collapse, and view its outputs with corresponding skepticism. Others are seeking to better understand the implications for politics, both domestically and internationally, of an increasingly globalised public sphere, in which elite control of information is being eroded (McNair, 2006). Building on the work of Castells and others on the network society, a number of contributors to the Maltby and Keeble collection cited above engage with what I in my own recent research have characterized as a chaos paradigm. Maltby’s (2008, p. 3) introduction to the book, for example, notes that the multiple and diverse means of disseminating information in the public sphere have undermined the ways in which “states are able to control what is revealed, or concealed about their activities.” In the same collection Tumber and Webster discuss the “chaotic information environment” which today confronts political elites, and observe “a growing awareness of human rights and democracy” on the part of the global audience (2008, p. 61).

As the Internet expands further, and real time news channels such as Al Jazeera proliferate and build audiences, scholarly focus on the relationship between globalised journalism and democratic processes is increasing (Chalaby, 2005). Al Jazeera itself has been the subject of several edited collections (see, for example, Zayani, 2005).

Commercialization, Dumbing Down and the Crisis of Public Communication

Another source of scholarly criticism on the relationship between journalism and democracy is the argument that competitive pressures on the media, and the consequent commercialization of journalism, have driven the standards of political journalism down, undermining democracy itself. Ever since the seventeenth century, the political media have been accused of deviating from the news agendas and styles required of democracy. In recent times, the intensifying commodification of journalism, it is argued, has favored the evolution of forms of political infotainment, a focus on sensation and drama in the political sphere, and the representation of democratic politics to the public as something akin to a soap opera. The popular vernacular for this process is “dumbing down,” although this is more than a critique of the intellectual content of political journalism, but also of its increasing focus on matters deemed trivial from the normative perspective. Political journalism should be about economic policy, foreign affairs, and other matters of substance, it is argued, rather than the love lives of politicians, or their ability to look good on TV.

This set of arguments was prominent in the 1990s, exemplified by Blumler and Gurevitch’s *The Crisis of Public Communication* (1995), Bob Franklin’s *Packaging Politics* (1994) and other key texts of that decade. More recently, Anderson and Ward’s (2007, p. 67) edited volume on *The Future of Journalism in the Advanced Democracies* laments the rise of “soft news” over “hard news,” leading them to the pessimistic conclusion that “it is increasingly unlikely that much of the future news provision in the UK will meet the informational needs of a democracy.” In addition to commercial pressures, they argue, the blogosphere and other developments arising from

the emergence of Internet technology are squeezing out “hard” news. Anderson and Ward (2007, p. 8) define hard news as “journalism that can be recognized as having the primary intent to inform and encourage reflection, debate and action on political, social and economic issues,” and journalism “that covers the issues that affect significantly people’s lives.” Against these criticisms and warnings of a degenerating public sphere, John Hartley (1996), Catharine Lumby (1999) and others (including this writer) have defended the evolving news agenda of political journalism as an intelligible and appropriate reflection of a popular democracy in which human interest issues have a role to play (if not to the exclusion of coverage of the more normatively preferred issues of public affairs). The blurring of traditional lines dividing the public from the private spheres is itself, from this perspective, a measure of the democratization of political culture, and its expansion to include the everyday concerns (and very human interests) of a mass citizenry.

Criticism has also been expressed of the extent to which coverage of politics has been subsumed within the broader category of celebrity culture, with its stress on personalities and image (Corner & Pels, 2003). Again, however, it is possible to argue that twenty first century politics is, inevitably, going to be about personality and its projection, and the judgments citizens make about the kinds of people who govern them. The 2004 election of Arnold Schwarzenegger as governor of California was covered at the time as symptomatic of this trend, condemned by some as evidence of the trivialization of politics and its colonization by the values of Hollywood and the entertainment industry. After the first wave of concern about the dire implications of Schwarzenegger’s success, however, and in the face of the fact that the world did not end and life went on more or less as usual, the political media in the United States and elsewhere became accustomed to his governorship, and even the remote possibility of a future presidential campaign by the former action movie star (remote because of his Austrian roots, rather than his celebrity history, which was, of course, no obstacle to Ronald Reagan’s rise from B movie status to governor and then two-term President).

Political Public Relations and the Rise of Spin

A key strand of both scholarly and public criticism of the journalism-democracy relationship has been the allegedly pernicious effect upon it of the growth of political public relations. While the conscious effort to shape media coverage of their declarations and actions by political actors is at least as old as political journalism itself, the twentieth century witnessed a qualitative transformation in both the intensity and the professionalism of the practice. The expansion of democracy on the one hand (with universal suffrage being achieved in most advanced capitalist societies by the outbreak of World War II), and of mass media on the other, created the need for purposeful communication between political actors and those who might vote or otherwise support them. Political public relations—the management of relations between politicians and their publics—became in the twentieth century a recognized sub-set of political communication, what I have characterized as a “Fifth Estate” evolving in parallel with the Fourth (McNair, 2001).

The emergence of political public relations has generated an extensive critical literature on “spin,” which reads it as a deviation from or distortion of the normative public sphere. Political PR is viewed from this perspective as propaganda, in the negative sense of that term (i.e., as intentional deceit and dishonesty), and critiqued on that basis, alongside a critique of the extent to which political discourse and performance has changed in the media age. From Boorstin’s (1962) seminal work on the pseudo-event to Aeron Davies (2007) recent book on *The Mediation of Power*, the concern with political communication practice, and its impact on journalism, has been central to journalism studies. So has the study of government communication, as in Sally Young’s (2007) recent edited collection of essays on the Australian situation. Feeding into this

work have been a growing collection of books by former “spin doctors” such as Alistair Campbell (2007), Bernard Ingham (1991) and Bill Clinton’s communication adviser for much of his time in the White House, Dick Morris (1997). While media scholars have tended to be critical of the influence of public relations on the journalism-democracy relationship, these insider accounts, as one would expect, seek to justify and explain the rise of spin as a logical and in many ways necessary product of mediated democracy which facilitates elite-mass communication, to the benefit of the democratic process.

HYPERADVERSARIALISM

A recurring criticism of political journalism has focused on the rise of what James Fallows in the 1990s called *hyperadversarialism* (1996). Adversarialism, as we have seen, is widely regarded as a normative characteristic of journalism in a democracy, necessary for the effective exercise of critical scrutiny over political elites. Tough questioning, fearless criticism of falsehoods and mistakes, and readiness to go up against power, are essential attributes of journalism in a democracy. Less welcome, for many, is the aggressive, confrontational stance increasingly adopted by journalists allegedly seeking not elucidation and clarification of the pertinent facts of politics, but dramatic and crowd-pleasing contests. This trend is often associated with the increasingly competitive media environment, in which drama and confrontation are presumed to be more saleable in the news market place than quiet, considered reportage. Journalists, it is suggested by Fallows and like-minded critics, are under pressure to stand out, to make their political interviews newsworthy with provocative questions and answers, to set the agenda and become the story themselves.

These arguments have often co-existed with other, contradictory suggestions that far from being too critical of political elites, the media are insufficiently so. Barnett and Gaber (2001, p. 2), for example, identified the “twenty first century crisis in political journalism” as one of heightening economic, political and technological pressures combining “inexorably” to produce a “more conformist, less critical reporting environment which is increasingly likely to prove supportive to incumbent governments.” By 2002, however, Barnett was complaining about the “increasingly hostile and irresponsible tenor of political journalism”, and “the hounding of politicians” by a “cynical and corrosive media.”³ Political commentator Polly Toynbee shared his view, arguing that “journalism of left and right converges in an anarchic zone of vitriol where elected politicians are always contemptible, their policies not just wrong but their motives all self-interest”.⁴

Writing in January 2005, constitutional historian Anthony Sampson argued that “journalists have gained power hugely [...and] become much more assertive, aggressive and moralizing in confronting other forms of power.”⁵ The changing style of political journalism, as this long-term observer of British democracy saw it, “reflects the declining role of other mediators, as much as the growing ambitions of the press.” Echoing the views of James Fallows regarding political journalism in the United States, Sampson identified the competitive pressures on media organizations as the source of this unwelcome shift in the journalism-politician relationship.

On the one hand they [journalists] are pressed towards more entertainment and sensation, to compete with their rivals, while the distinction between quality papers and tabloids has become less clear cut. On the other hand their serious critics expect them to take over the role of public educators and interpreters from the traditional mediators, including parliament.

This argument has driven the British debate around political journalism in recent years, as in John Lloyd’s much-talked about *What’s Wrong With Our Media*, published in 2004, which

sparked a period of critical (and self-critical) journalistic reflection. Lloyd, himself a respected political journalist for many years, singled out the Andrew Gilligan affair of 2003 as an example of how reckless political journalism had become (Gilligan, for Lloyd, was reckless in suggesting that the government had lied about the threat posed to Britain by Iraqi weapons of mass destruction in order to mobilize public opinion behind invasion and removal of the Saddam Hussein regime). “If the best of journalism—the BBC”, wrote Lloyd (2004, p. 14), “could both put out a report like that and defend it, and remain convinced that it had been unfairly criticised by [the Hutton inquiry, set up by the Blair government to investigate the circumstances of Gilligan’s “sexed up” report and the subsequent suicide of his source, government scientist David Kelly] and traduced by government, then we have produced a media culture which in many ways contradicts the ideals to which we pay homage.”

Political journalists cannot, of course, be both too conformist and too confrontational at the same time, and as ever in cultural commentary, one observer’s “hyperadversarialism” is another’s toadying favoritism. There *has* been a long term decline of journalistic deference towards political elites, as I and others have argued (McNair, 2000), rooted in wider socio-cultural trends and in itself very welcome from the perspective of what is good for democracy. Political elites have never been held more to account, more closely scrutinized, in both their public roles and their private lives, than today, a trend now exacerbated by the ubiquity of the Internet and satellite news media. The always-on, globalised news culture of the twenty first century makes journalists ever more dependent on the political sphere for stories, and less willing to accept traditional codes and conventions as to the appropriate subject matter and style of coverage. The Clinton-Lewinsky scandal is only the most infamous example of this trend, now echoed regularly in comparable scandals all over the world. There are reasonable objections to the growing journalistic fascination with personality and private life amongst the political class. And yet, as John Hartley (1996) and other have argued, this kind of political journalism reflects an evolving public sphere, in which the private as well as public affairs of politicians can have relevance to democratic decision-making. Issues of trust, personal morality and honesty *are* important in informing the judgments citizens make. If in the not-too-distant past they were generally excluded from public discourse, today they contribute to a broader picture of political life constructed by the media. Some politicians benefit from such exposure, while others suffer. The new rules of the game are widely understood, however, and contemporary politicians cannot claim ignorance as to the importance of image and personality. Indeed, an entire apparatus of public relations and promotional communication has developed precisely in order to manage media relations.

This brings us to a further defense of hyperadversarialism, related to the previous section’s discussion of the rise of spin—that journalists today face politicians who are highly skilled in the communicative arts, supported by professional spin doctors, advisors and consultants. In response, political journalism has of necessity become more reflective and *metadiscursive*. This is the journalism of *political process*, which accepts as a given from the outset that politicians are engaged in spin and publicity, and actively seeks to expose and deconstruct it, in the interests of uncovering a deeper level of truth. So, yes, Jeremy Paxman asks a politician the same question fourteen times during a TV interview—as he did of the Conservative Home Secretary in the 1990s—and fourteen times he receives an evasive answer. If, as the critics of such gladiatorial journalism argue, the audience learns little or nothing about the substance of the issue under interrogation, it is left in no doubt that the politician has something to hide, or is insufficiently in command of his or her brief to answer the question with openness and confidence. That is useful knowledge in a modern mediated democracy, as long as it is set alongside information about policy.

In political journalism, as elsewhere, fashions change. The fashion for aggressive political interviewing of the type exemplified by Paxman, John Humphrys and others, which was

prevalent in the BBC in the 1990s and came to exemplify hyperadversarialism and the “corrosive cynicism” of political journalists in the British context, has evolved into a more subtle approach which recognizes that there are other modes of interrogation than the one premised on the question, “Is that lying bastard lying to me?” That there are many interviewing styles which can extract information useful to the democratic process was always the case, as illustrated by David Frost’s deceptively gentle sofa interview style. Today, perhaps, there is greater acceptance that the bulldog terrier approach to political journalism is not always the best way to maximize the delivery of useful information (although, as of this writing, Paxman and Humphrys remain the unchallenged titans of the political interview in the UK). Paxman himself, in a lecture given to the 2007 Edinburgh Television Festival, expressed sympathy with the view of Tony Blair, given in one of his final prime ministerial speeches, that the British press were like “a feral beast” in their approach to politicians.

CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS?

Criticisms of the agenda, content and style of political journalism are cyclical, often contradictory, and rarely resolvable in a definitive manner. As citizens make judgments about politicians according to changing fashions (Tony Blair was judged by many to be too smooth a communicator by far; his successor Gordon Brown is often accused, not least by the political media who railed about spin for the Blair decade, to be not smooth enough), scholars and other commentators make judgments about the perceived failings of political journalism, often linked to wider concerns about the health of democracy. Journalists have been blamed, for example—and the rise of hyperadversarialism, process journalism and political infotainment have all been implicated in this trend—for declining rates of democratic participation in Britain, the United States and comparable countries. Citizens, it is argued, are disillusioned, bored, and increasingly cynical about politicians whom the media continually attack and criticize for real or imagined failings. None dispute that coverage of financial corruption and other matters of relevance to the performance of public office is legitimate, and the more adversarial the better, but do our media really need to be so obsessed with style, personality and process? Are not these obsessions to blame for the historically low turn outs of the 2001 general election in the UK, or the 2000 presidential election in the United States?

The truth is, no one knows. There are competing explanations for changing levels of democratic participation across cultures and over time—economic affluence, the decline of ideology, the increase in the number of elections in which people have rights to vote (in this author’s country, for example, Scotland—since devolution was introduced there have been elections for the European parliament, the Scottish parliament, the Westminster parliament, and local councils. Many citizens participate gladly in all of these. Others find their democratic energies dissipating before the regularity of campaigns, and the variety and complexity of voting systems). Journalism may be a factor in explaining trends in democratic participation, but it is beyond the current state of social scientific knowledge to say with certainty how important a factor.

Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen’s (2005, p. 141) study of political journalism, while “not blaming the news media for the general pattern of decline in voting and participation in electoral politics” argues that “the way ordinary people are represented in the news media does little to inspire active forms of citizenship.” By representing people as consumers rather than citizens, they conclude on the basis of their analysis of US and UK news content, “news is part of the problem rather than part of the solution.”

The political journalists have themselves adopted a number of strategies designed to engage

audiences in the democratic process, such as more studio debates and other forms of public participation, utilizing the new technologies referred to above. The main commercial public service channel in the UK, ITV, experimented with reality TV techniques in *Vote For Me*, a series in which members of the public “stood” for selection as a parliamentary candidate in the 2005 election, chosen by studio audiences and viewers at home. The experiment failed to have significant impact, but was an honorable attempt to harness the demonstrable enthusiasm for public participation in decision-making demonstrated by the success of reality TV shows such as *Big Brother*.

One fact that can be stated with confidence is that, regardless of its agenda, content and style, there is more political journalism available to the average citizen in the average mature democracy than at any previous time in history. Newspapers are crammed with columnists and commentaries. Political editors and special correspondents are prominent in network news schedules. Twenty four hour news channels proliferate, while the Internet is crowded with blogs and online punditry. Much of this content is trivial, polemical, and ultimately disposable, as much political journalism always was. Much remains focused on the traditional agenda of political journalism—the economy, social affairs, the environment, and foreign policy, the latter having been boosted in newsworthiness by 9/11 and its aftermath. Amidst the arguments about the quality of political journalism, which come and go, this quantitative trend hints at a broad public appetite for information and news-based culture which must give some grounds for optimism about the future health of democracies.

FUTURE RESEARCH IN POLITICAL JOURNALISM STUDIES

Research on the content and contribution of journalism to the democratic process will continue. Political actors, scholars, and journalists themselves will continue to monitor the output of the political media, testing it against their expectations of what the journalism-democracy relationship should be. There is, however, a growing concern with the potential role of new digital media in enhancing participatory and interactive modes of political communication between the public as a whole and political elites. The European Union, for example, has begun consultations on how to ensure that the public service media of the future can be used to maximize democratic engagement and participation. In many countries, as the transition from analogue to digital media proceeds, and as media organizations adapt to emerging phenomena such as user generated content, blogging and social networking, the extent to which these new media can improve the performance of the political media as democratic assets remains a key question for scholars in both the political science and media studies fields. This concern extends to the role of new media in global conflicts.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: JOURNALISM AND DEMOCRACY IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

Political journalism of the modern type emerged in parallel with the first democracies, and the bourgeois revolutions of early modern Europe. Nearly 400 years later, the spread of democratic regimes across the planet, and the steady decline of authoritarian government since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, has been accompanied by the growth of a globalised public sphere. In Latin America (Alves, 2005), Southeast Asia (Atkins, 2002), the former Soviet bloc, and the Middle East (Mellor, 2005, 2007), the end of authoritarianism and its replacement by

democratic polities, hesitant and subject to resistance and reversal as that process remains, has been fuelled by the increasing availability of, and public access to, independent journalistic media such as Al Jazeera (Zayani, 2005), online sites, and other forms of digital journalism. Arab scholars and journalists now speak routinely of an “Arab public sphere,” in which liberal principles of pluralism and political independence are pursued, even by a channel such as Al Jazeera which has a very different approach to the conflicts being played out in the Middle East than, say, CNN or the BBC. In China, half a billion people now use the Internet regularly, and the number grows steadily, presenting the Chinese communists with a deepening problem of legitimacy. That country’s hybrid of “capitalism with Chinese characteristics” had of this writing avoided media freedom in the liberal pluralist sense, but the pressures to open access to media, up to and beyond the 2008 Olympics, were clear. In Putin’s Russia, meanwhile, state restrictions on the political media, and intimidation of journalists across the country, were meeting resistance at home and abroad, widely interpreted as antithetical to the country’s transition to mature democracy. In Russia, as in most other transitional societies in the early twenty first century, the establishment of genuine, lasting democracy was recognized to be inseparable from the establishment of free political media, a functioning public sphere and a pluralistic civil society. The emerging democracies differ in their form, as does the political journalism which supports them. Democratic political cultures will vary widely, and will always be rooted in specific histories and circumstances. There does now seem to be an acceptance, however, from the offices of Al Jazeera to the boardrooms of the BBC and CNN, that the normative principles of liberal journalism identified in this chapter have a general applicability. Whether the pragmatic realities of global politics will permit them to become universally entrenched remains to be seen.

NOTES

1. From the first ever law of copyright in England, enacted in 1556.
2. The exemplary case of this normative role being performed in practice is that of Carl Woodward and Edward Bernstein, and their exposure of the Watergate cover up which ultimately forced the resignation of President Richard Nixon. This famous case, and the book and the film which were based on it, provide a lesson in what journalistic scrutiny of democratic government means in reality, and the challenges it may require on the part of individual journalists and editors, who may have to overcome wilful evasion and cover-up of the facts, intimidation and harassment, and worse.
3. Barnett, S., “The age of contempt,” *Guardian*, October 28, 2002.
4. Toynbee, P., “Breaking news,” *Guardian*, September 3, 2003.
5. Sampson, A., “The fourth estate under fire,” *Guardian*, January 10, 2005.

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