

# Can the Media Serve Democracy?

Stephen Coleman  
Giles Moss  
and  
Katy Parry

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Essays in Honour of Jay G. Blumler



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Essays in Honour of Jay G. Blumler

Edited by

Stephen Coleman

*University of Leeds, UK*

Giles Moss

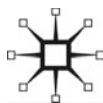
*University of Leeds, UK*

and

Katy Parry

*University of Leeds, UK*

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# Notes on Contributors

**W. Lance Bennett** is a professor of political science and Ruddick C. Lawrence is a professor of communication at the University of Washington, Seattle, USA, where he directs the Center for Communication and Civic Engagement ([www.engagedcitizen.org](http://www.engagedcitizen.org)). The focus of his work is on how communication processes affect citizen engagement with politics. His most recent book is *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (with Alexandra Segerberg, 2013). He has received the Ithiel de Sola Pool and Murray Edelman career awards from the American Political Science Association, and the National Communication Association has recognized him as a Distinguished Scholar for lifetime achievement in the study of human communication.

**Menahem Blondheim** teaches in the Department of History and the Department of Communication and Journalism at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where he holds the Karl and Matilda Newhouse Chair in Communications. He also serves as the head of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace. In researching the history of communications and communications in history, he focuses on the United States and on the Jewish experience. He also explores communication technologies, old and new, and is engaged in big-data studies analyzing the representation of our contemporary world in international online news.

**Jay G. Blumler** is emeritus professor of public communication at the University of Leeds and emeritus professor of journalism at the University of Maryland. He is a leading, internationally recognized figure in political communication, having published numerous books, including *The Crisis of Public Communication* (with Michael Gurevitch, 1995). He is a fellow and former president of the International Communication Association. In 2006, he was given a lifetime achievement award by the American Political Science Association.

**Kees Brants** is an honorary professor at the University of Amsterdam's School of Communication Research and professor emeritus of political communication at Leiden University. Before reading political science and mass communication, he studied journalism and worked as a

reporter for local and national newspapers in the Netherlands. He has published extensively, and his latest English-language book being *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy* (edited with Katrin Voltmer, 2011). With his wife, he shares what some call a morbid fascination for the social construction in memory, history and lieux de mémoires of the First World War, about which they wrote two books.

**Stephen Coleman** is a professor of political communication at the University of Leeds. He has published several articles and books, the most recent of which is *How Voters Feel* (2013). He is also an honorary professor of political science at the University of Copenhagen and a research associate at the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford. His book *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship* (with Jay Blumler, 2009) was winner of the American Political Science Association Award for best book on politics and information technology.

**John Corner** is a visiting professor in the School of Media and Communication at the University of Leeds and emeritus professor of the University of Liverpool. He has written widely on media and culture in books and journals. Among his major publications are *The Art of Record* (1996), *Critical Ideas in Television Studies* (1999), *Public Issue Television* (with Peter Goddard and Kay Richardson, 2007) and *Theorising Media: Power, Form and Subjectivity* (2011, paperback 2014). He is an editor of the journal *Media, Culture and Society*.

**James Curran** is director of Goldsmiths Leverhulme Media Research Centre and a professor of communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. He has written or edited over twenty books about the media, including most recently *Misunderstanding the Internet* (with Natalie Fenton and Des Freedman, 2012), *Media and Democracy* (2011), *Power Without Responsibility* (with Jean Seaton, 7th edition, 2010), *Media and Society* (5th edition, 2010). He is a fellow of the International Communication Association in recognition of his lifetime research on the media, and has been a visiting professor at California, Pennsylvania, Stanford, Stockholm and Oslo Universities.

**Stephen Cushion** is a senior lecturer at the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies. He is co-author of *The Rise of 24-Hour News Television: Global Perspectives* (2010), and sole author of *Television Journalism* (2011) and *The Democratic Value of News: Why Public Service Media Matter* (2012).

**William H. Dutton** is the Quello Professor of Media and Information Policy in the College of Communication Arts and Sciences at MSU,

where he is director of the Quello Center. Bill was the first professor of internet studies at the University of Oxford, where he was founding director of the Oxford Internet Institute, and a fellow of Balliol College. He has recently edited the *Oxford Handbook of Internet Studies* (2013), four volumes on *Politics and the Internet* (2014), and a reader entitled *Society and the Internet* (with Mark Graham, 2014).

**Frank Esser** is a professor of international and comparative media research at the University of Zurich. There he also co-directs an 80-person strong National Research Center on the Challenges to Democracy in the 21st Century (*NCCR Democracy*). His research focuses on cross-national studies of news journalism and political communication. His co-edited books include *Comparing Political Communication* (2004), *Handbook of Comparative Communication Research* (2012), and *Mediatization of Politics* (2014).

**Bob Franklin** is a professor of journalism studies at Cardiff University, UK. He is the editor of *Digital Journalism*, *Journalism Practice* and *Journalism Studies*. He edits the book series *Journalism Studies: Theory and Practice* and co-edits a series, *Journalism Studies: Key Texts*. His recent books include *The Future of Journalism: Developments and Debates* (2013); *Journalism, Sources and Credibility: New Perspectives* (with Matt Carlson, 2011) and *Journalism Education, Training and Employment* (with Donica Mensing, 2011). He was a visiting professor at the Manship School of Journalism and Mass Communications, Louisiana State University, in 2008.

**Elihu Katz** is the Distinguished Trustee Professor at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania and emeritus professor of Sociology and Communication at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was the first director of the Israeli Television, founded Hebrew University's Communication Institute, and served as former director of the Institute of Applied Social Research in Israel. He has authored many books, including the influential *Uses of Mass Communications* (with Jay Blumler, 1974), and *Media Events* (with Daniel Dayan, 1992). He is an elected member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

**Sonia Livingstone** is a professor in the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. Taking a comparative, critical and contextualised approach, she asks how the changing conditions of mediation are reshaping everyday practices and possibilities for action, identity and communication rights, with a focus on children and youth. She is author or editor of eighteen books, including *Media Consumption and*

*Public Engagement* (with Nick Couldry and Tim Markham, 2010), *Media Regulation: Governance and the Interests of Citizens and Consumers* (with Peter Lunt, 2012); *Meanings of Audiences: Comparative Discourses* (edited with Richard Butsch, 2013) and *Digital Technologies in the Lives of Young People* (edited with Chris Davies and John Coleman, 2014).

**Paolo Mancini** is a professor in the Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche, Università di Perugia. His research focuses mostly on political communication in a comparative dimension. Mancini's major publications include *Politics, Media and Modern Democracy* (with David Swanson, 1996) and *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (with Dan Hallin, 2004). This book won the 2005 Goldsmith Book Award from Harvard University, the 2005 Diamond Anniversary Book Award of the National Communication Association and the 2006 outstanding Book Award of the International Communication Association.

**Gianpietro Mazzoleni** is a professor of political communication at the University of Milan, Italy. His research focuses on media-politics relations, pop politics and sociology of communication. His work has been published in *Political Communication* and *European Journal of Communication* and in the edited volume, *Mediatization of Politics* (2014). He is general editor of the *International Encyclopaedia of Political Communication* (forthcoming).

**Denis McQuail** is emeritus professor at the University of Amsterdam and honorary fellow of the Amsterdam School of Communication Research. He started his career at the Television Research Unit of the University of Leeds in 1959. His work has covered several different aspects of communication research, including political communication, audience research, media policy and media performance. He was a founding editor with Jay Blumler of *European Journal of Communication*. His most recent publication was *Journalism and Society* (2013).

**David Morrison** is emeritus professor at the Institute of Communication Studies (renamed the School of Media and Communication in August 2014), University of Leeds. He was one of the very early figures involved in the establishment of the Institute through the development of social science research. Supported by endowment monies raised by Jay Blumler, his activity offers itself as a continuous link to Blumler's older 'Centre for Television Research'. His work has involved large-scale survey research on both social and political issues, including voting, along with historical writing on communication research, notably a biography of Paul Lazarsfeld.

**Giles Moss** is a lecturer in media policy in the School of Media and Communication, University of Leeds. His research focuses on various aspects of the relationship between new media and politics, including not just the politics that goes on through these media but also the politics that surrounds them and shapes how they are structured and used. His work has appeared in a range of academic journals including *British Journal of Politics & International Relations*, *Convergence*, *Political Studies*, and *New Media & Society*.

**Katy Parry** is a lecturer in media and communication at the University of Leeds. Her work focuses on visual politics and how ‘frames of war’ circulate in public culture. She is a co-author of *Pockets of Resistance: British News Media, War and Theory in the 2003 Invasion of Iraq* (with Piers Robinson, Peter Goddard, Craig Murray and Philip Taylor, 2010), and *Political Culture and Media Genre: Beyond the News* (with Kay Richardson and John Corner, 2012).

**Winfried Schulz** is emeritus professor of mass communication and political science and an associate lecturer at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany. He formerly held positions at the universities of Mainz and Muenster and visiting appointments at several European universities as well as at the University of California at Berkeley. He has published extensively in various areas of political communication. Schulz is doctor *honoris causa* of the Charles University Prague and a fellow of the International Communication Association.

**James Stanyer** is a reader in comparative political communication in the Department of Social Sciences at Loughborough University. He has authored three books and co-edited three collections, and has published in a range of leading journals in the field of communication and media studies. He has been a principal investigator on projects funded by the BBC Trust, the UK government and third-sector organizations. He serves on the editorial boards of various journals, and is a member of the COST Action network on Populist Political Communication and the Network of European Political Communication Scholars.

**David H. Weaver** is a distinguished professor and the Roy W. Howard Research Professor Emeritus in the School of Journalism at Indiana University. He has published thirteen books, including *Media Agenda-Setting in a Presidential Election* (1981), *The American Journalist* (1986), *The Formation of Campaign Agendas* (1991), *The American Journalist in the 1990s* (1996), *The American Journalist in the 21st Century* (2007), and *The Global Journalist in the 21st Century* (2012), as well as numerous articles

and book chapters about journalists, the agenda-setting role of media, voter learning in political campaigns, newspaper readership, foreign news coverage, and journalism education. He is past president of AEJMC (Association for Education in Journalism & Mass Communication) and a Fellow of ICA (International Communication Association).

# 1

## Introduction: Can the Media Serve Democracy?

*Stephen Coleman, Giles Moss and Katy Parry*

### The problem

There has arguably never been a time when so many opportunities have been available for 'the people' to contribute to the democratic process, yet political participation seems to be in decline...

(McHugh, D. and Parvin, P. *Neglecting Democracy: Participation and Representation in 21st Century Politics*, London, Hansard Society, 2005: pp. 7–8)

The general argument for a free press as a means of free communication... has to do with a number of different things. These include the ability to give a powerful voice in the public domain to those unable to do so effectively for themselves... Importantly, it is also to do with the constitution by the media in their own right of a public forum, where information, ideas and entertainment are both circulated and held up to scrutiny.

(*Report of the Leveson Inquiry into the Culture, Practices and Ethics of the Press*, 2012: Vol. I, p. 62, para 3.4)

It is sometimes said that the media is accountable daily through the choice of readers and viewers. That is true up to a point. But the reality is that the viewers or readers have no objective yardstick to measure what they are being told. In every other walk of life in our society that exercises power, there are external forms of accountability, not least through the media itself... I do believe this relationship between public life and media is now damaged in a manner that requires repair. The damage saps the country's confidence and self-belief; it undermines its assessment of itself, its institutions; and

above all, it reduces our capacity to take the right decisions, in the right spirit for our future.

(Speech to Reuters by British Prime Minister Tony Blair, 12 June 2007, available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/6744581.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/6744581.stm), date accessed 14 June 2014)

Something seems to be wrong. Talk of decline, disengagement and disenchantment dominates the debate about the state of contemporary democracy. All too often, such talk leads on to expressions of ill-concealed frustration about ‘apathetic’ citizens who have forgotten their civic ‘duty’ and ‘irresponsible’ media failing to serve the public interest. Avoiding these well-rehearsed lamentations, the aim of this book is to reflect upon the ways in which one of the key institutional actors in the public domain – the media in their various forms – both serve and undermine democratic objectives. Let us take the Leveson Report’s call for the media: ‘to give a powerful voice in the public domain to those unable to do so effectively for themselves’ and to provide ‘a public forum, where information, ideas and entertainment are both circulated and held up to scrutiny’ as a normative benchmark. To what extent do the media in developed political democracies reach that benchmark? How realistic is it to expect them to do so?

We start from the assumption that for the media to serve democracy they must enter into a positive relationship with their readers, viewers and listeners as citizens. To address people as citizens is to acknowledge that they are more than consumers who buy things, audiences who gaze upon spectacles, or isolated egos, obsessed with themselves. To act as a citizen is to engage in public situations of various kinds with people one might not know, who might not share one’s interests, tastes, values, or even language. Sometimes the interaction will involve relations with governments, authorities, or employers. At other times, it involves ways of living alongside neighbours and strangers. At all times, the work of citizenship is geared towards the sustenance and invigoration of shared political communities. Without strong and prevalent civic attitudes, the binding ties of social solidarity and the amicable co-existence of cultural differences are likely to be at risk.

But the work of being an active citizen can be complex and time-consuming. Firstly, it involves being sufficiently informed to know what’s going on in the world; what matters personally and what matters globally; how government works and how language is used both to illuminate and obfuscate political realities; where to access reliable information and how to compare sources so that rival perspectives can be transformed into useful knowledge. Secondly, active citizens need to arrive at judgements



about who and what can be trusted. Can one party or politician be trusted more than another? Are elected representatives and governments able to do what they promise at election time? How far can friends, neighbours and strangers be depended upon to engage in the kind of collective action that might bring about desired changes? Can the existing constitutional system be trusted to serve the interests of all people, or should active citizens be thinking about working around the system, creating their own rules of engagement? Thirdly, active citizens need to make their voices heard and their presence felt. This involves using whatever skills and resources are available to develop networks of collective self-organisation, contributing to the political discourse and making a tangible impact upon the ways in which political power is exercised.

Most people find these challenges overwhelming. They know little about formal politics (Carpini, 1996; Eveland et al., 2005), rarely trust politicians or political processes (Norris, 2011; Hardin, 2013) and feel that they have little or no voice in policy formation and decision-making (Kenski and Stroud, 2006; Karp and Banducci, 2008). It is little wonder that many citizens seem to have given up on politics, believing that participation will probably result in confusion, manipulation or frustration.

The media have a crucial role to play here. Whether in the form of daily newspapers, radio discussion programmes, television news bulletins and issue documentaries, or the vast range of channels of public expression that have emerged online, it is the media's first task to remind people that they are inhabitants of a world in which they can make a difference. By enabling citizens to encounter and make sense of events, relationships and cultures of which they have no direct experience, the media constitute a public arena in which members of the public come together as more than passing strangers. As media theorist Michael Schudson has argued,

When the media offer the public an item of news, they confer upon it public legitimacy. They bring it into a common public forum where it can be discussed by a general audience. They not only distribute the report of an event or announcement to a large group, they amplify it. An event or speech or document in one location becomes within a day, or within hours, or instantaneously, available to millions of people all over a region or country or the world. This has enormous effects. (1995: p.19)

How can the media perform this vital function in ways that might enable citizens to become better informed, more confident about making

political judgements and more able to communicate in meaningful and influential ways? In short, how might the media play a role in nurturing and stimulating active democratic citizenship?

Many professional media producers would respond rather defensively by saying that they are already performing this role perfectly well. Their job, they would say, is to provide objective and balanced information to citizens who are free to decide what they want to do with it. They could point to numerous opportunities for the public to express themselves via newspaper letters' columns, phone-ins, studio-based discussions in which politicians face direct questioning from the public, user-generated content that helps to shape and enrich media agendas – not to mention the numerous new forms of public expression afforded by social media. They would argue that it is not their job to persuade citizens to participate, but to provide them with a trusted guide to what's going on and how they could, if they so wished, engage in various forms of civic activity.

Critics of the contemporary media argue that there is an element of self-delusion at play here: that by persistently presenting politics as a cynical game and politicians as manipulators who must be exposed, the media have become 'complicit in a process which is degrading democracy's institutions and undermining political representatives' (Barnett, 2002: p. 400). This critique has taken a number of forms. Jay Blumler (1983b: p. 67) has argued that the media stand 'accused of denigrating the political sphere instead of serving and invigorating it, encouraging opinion manipulation, and sapping participatory dispositions'. John Lloyd (2004: p. 1) has argued that 'the British media are destructive... of public communication and democratic practice'. His argument is that the media have become 'ravenous for conflict, scandal, splits, rows and failure' and have turned politics into 'a spectator sport' (*ibid.*, p. 89). For all of these critics, the consequence of the media's obsession with the Westminster bubble and the exposure of ignominious political behaviour is mass public disenchantment with both the people and institutions that claim to represent them.

### **How might the media better serve democracy?**

But there are signs that this mediated relationship between the public and their representatives is changing in at least two highly significant ways. Firstly, the old tripartite model of political communication involving a fixed pyramid of relationships between politicians, journalists and citizens is not nearly as clear-cut as it once was. While

many aspects of this model continue to prevail, they do so within an expanded media ecology that includes many more platforms for public communication, offering variety, while threatening fragmentation. The idea of the public as an audience that receives information and entertainment from vast industry-like transmission centres is still highly relevant to mass broadcasters and advertisers, but it must now compete with new forms of mediation which, in some contexts and for certain demographic groups, changes the terms of public communication. The rise and ubiquity of digital media makes it possible for messages, images and sentiments to circulate within social networks that lack centres and are characterized by many-to-many polylogue rather than monological one-to-many transmission. In this new media ecology, the gatekeeping role of editors and journalists is undermined by the prevalence of user-generated news content and digital networks with agendas that are no longer susceptible to elite management. Regardless of the extent to which one believes the balance between old and new media is currently weighted in favour of the former, there is little doubt that the latter have a capacity to disrupt the flow of the former; the hegemony of national media centres is atrophying.

Alongside this reconfiguration of the media ecology is a second significant change. Whereas the meaning of the term 'political' in political communication seemed pretty self-evident half a century ago, when scholars like Jay Blumler, Denis McQuail and Elihu Katz began to consider the impact of television on political life, it is no longer as simple as that. Politics was taken to refer to a narrow set of institutions and practices: national parliaments and executives; local government; mainstream parties; a political agenda that, while changing from week to week, tended to revolve around a fixed range of issues, policies and ideologies. The study of political communication, therefore, was mainly interested in the ways that political institutions disseminated messages to the public via the mainstream media; the strategic operations involved in election campaigning and government information initiatives; attempts by the media to set agendas and frame events; and attempts by party 'spin doctors' to influence or resist such priming and framing. Indeed, much contemporary political communication revolves around precisely these themes. But in recent decades political governance has moved on to a number of different and often competing levels: local, regional and transnational institutions vie with national polities for legitimacy, while unaccountable global organisations wield power that no government can control. The locus of political power and decision-making is no longer as apparent as it once seemed to be. Alongside

this so-called 'decentering' of political power, there has been a profound sense in which the self-referential language and customs of institutional politics are giving way to new forms of public expression and popular accountability. Politics has become more personal, in the sense that power relationships are increasingly acknowledged to be taking place at the mundane, micro level of everyday experience. Political language has become more vernacular, as power is increasingly rehearsed, performed and resisted in terms that shun the exclusivity of institutional elites. Daily struggles over power, authority and norms, whether they take place in the home, the workplace, the playground or the pub, are increasingly recognized as political. People who do not think of themselves as acting politically frequently find themselves employing democratic discourses and principles in order to pursue what they might prefer to think of as personal campaigns for a better life (Eliasoph, 1998).

These two changes in the communication ecology and political culture are forcing the media to rethink their relationship to their audiences. Large, authoritative, regulated media organisations, such as broadcasting networks, newspapers and press agencies, can no longer hope to manage the production of news and its dissemination to mass national populations. The interruptive force of digital media places pressure on them to gather and tell their stories in different ways. Notions of democratic citizenship as a set of obligatory, somewhat ritualized practises, upon which politicians once based a thin and irregular conception of political representation, begin to look unsustainable in the face of public disenchantment. An urge to 'do politics differently' has led parties and media organisations to adopt a number of experimental strategies in recent years, ranging from online 'conversations' with supporters and well-rehearsed attempts to show their leaders being 'ordinary' and 'spontaneous' in the case of parties, to conspicuous audience feedback loops and satirical performances of political infotainment in the case of the mainstream media. But few of these initiatives have either taken root or convinced citizens that the citadels of official politics are open to them. Political communication seems to be in flux, stuck awkwardly between known ways that don't work and unknown ways that might.

While political communication scholars are under pressure to expand their field of study and employ more innovative methods of tracking the interflow between elite and grass-roots politics, some norms remain persistently relevant. In his many writing collaborations, but especially that with the late Michael Gurevitch, Blumler has set out clearly what democracies should expect from the media, including

- surveillance of sociopolitical developments
- identifying the most relevant issues
- providing a platform for debate across a diverse range of views
- holding officials to account for the way they exercise power
- providing incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved in the political process
- resisting efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence.

To what extent do these normative requirements encapsulate the requirements of democratic media in the current era? What are the obstacles to realising them? What sort of initiatives could feasibly be taken to implement them? In short, *Can the Media Serve Democracy?*

In celebrating the huge contribution that Jay Blumler has made to the study of political communication, not only as a pioneering and imaginative researcher in a range of areas, a theorist of uses and gratifications, a deeply thoughtful and influential policy thinker, and a generous leader in the field of media and communication studies, it is upon his unflinching normative commitment to a culturally enlarging conception of media democracy that we focus in this volume. In a recent lecture given at the University of Ljubljana, Blumler suggested that democracy should seek to realize ‘the ideal of collective self-determination’, and for this to happen, the media should adhere to what he called ‘four purposes of civic communication’. The first is ‘to feed citizens’ need for surveillance of those parts of the political environment that matter to them’. The second is ‘to uphold the norm of meaningful choice over those issues and problems that may ultimately determine how we live with each other’. The third is ‘inclusiveness: that all parts of society that are likely to be affected by or hold views upon alternative approaches to policies should be hearable on them’. Fourth, the media must ‘provide navigable avenues of comprehending exchange between citizens and decision-takers, affording the former real opportunities to influence the latter and for the latter to know the former better’. The simplicity, practicality and radicalism of these principles capture well Blumler the man and the thinker.

Some of the world’s leading political communication scholars were asked to write chapters (and agreed willingly as soon as they knew that the volume was in honour of Jay Blumler) addressing the title question of this book. In endeavouring to address this broad but thorny question, the contributors wrote from a variety of perspectives and methods of study, reflecting the rich diversity of scholarship across which Jay’s work has

been a formative influence. There is inevitable overlap in the sections of the book, but we have organized chapters according to four broad subject areas: (1) Media Systems and Comparative Research, (2) Journalism and the Public Interest, (3) Public Cultures and Mediated Publics, and (4) Changing Media, New Democratic Opportunities, with a final section. (5) The Past, Present and Future of Political Communication, reflecting back on Jay's career as a founding father of media studies. In addition to arranging the essays along thematic preoccupations, the structure of the collection allows us to explore questions at the heart of Jay's body of work: the importance of empirical communications research and comparative studies; a strong normative concern with the public interest and the quality of public discourse and democratic politics; and an interest in the possible implications academic research can have for policymaking. In what follows, we outline the chapters in turn, noting the particular contribution of each author while placing their insights in wider debates within media and communications research.

## **Contributions**

### **Part I: Media Systems and Comparative Research**

The chapters in Part I focus on the institutions of political communication and the potential benefits afforded through comparative work and a macro-level overview of political and media systems. It is the notion of a 'system' which **Paolo Mancini** unpicks in his chapter, addressing how the term 'media system' has been defined (if at all) and understood by media scholars. Mancini suggests that as media scholars we can learn some lessons from 'sister' sciences, such as political science, which have used this notion for a longer period of time, and that their experience may be useful in creating a more precise definition of 'system'. Indeed, Mancini points out that it is with the work of Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch that the word 'system' begins to assume a more precise scientific identity, progressively abandoning its 'indicative' meaning to one which presents a framework of characteristics (structures, procedures, actors) and so allows for precise differentiation in comparative research. In responding to criticisms of the 'system' approach, Mancini notes comprehensiveness as its very 'advantage' in comparative use. Citing an even earlier elucidation by Almond and Verba that 'the concept of a system is an ecological concept that underlines the interactions between the sphere of politics and its environment' (1966: p. 26), Mancini reminds us not only of the problematic, indistinct boundaries involved, but that

recognitions of the intricacies involved in an 'ecological' concept are hardly new. The chapter concludes with a caution on the dangers of 'going comparative' without a clear understanding of theoretical frameworks, but also makes the case for research based on national cultures: 'despite the global cultural market, the undeniable tendency towards homogenisation and hybridisation and the rise of the world-wide web, each media system is still affected by the local culture, by the national language and by all those cultural symbols that still characterize cultural production'.

The challenges of comparing media systems are further addressed in our next two chapters, by **Frank Esser** and **Kees Brants**. Taking up Mancini's challenge, Esser argues that although comparative research has made more progress in some subject areas than in others, we are observing the gradual emergence of comparative communications as a recognized subdiscipline, comparable to *comparative politics* in political science. The chapter explores whether and how structural and semi-structural 'independent variables' suggested by Jay's and others' empirical work (political structure and culture, campaign professionalism, media structure and culture, and media professionalism) can help explain content-related 'dependent variables' like media depoliticization, media interventionism or media negativity in election news discourse. Esser stresses the democratic role of the media, especially during election periods, and expresses a strong commitment to investigating national news contexts and cultures through a more thorough and explicit conceptualization of key concepts. For Esser, an ultimate scholarly goal would be a comprehensive system-sensitive news theory – something that he argues is so far absent from the field of mass communication research.

In addition to commenting on the intellectual benefits (triggering creative imagination, spurring new modes of analysis) and the practical or pragmatic concerns (crucial availability of funding) of comparative research, Kees Brants also notes the continuing influence of Blumler and Gurevitch's (1995) framework for political communication in the design of models and classifications, here summarized as degree of state control; mass media partisanship; media-political integration; and the nature of the legitimating creed of media institutions. Brants considers five types of pitfalls, which appear to be only increasing in seriousness: methodological issues, especially where concepts might be understood differently; value judgements or normative assumptions; decisions on what to compare (media forms, units of analysis, tools); Anglo-American bias; and an inherent determinism or assumption of a one-directional trend. As suggested in Mancini's chapter, it is the Internet which

presents a fundamental problem in comparing media systems. Where Mancini concludes that each media system is still strongly dependent on country traditions and language, Brants sees a greater challenge to the boundaries involved. For example, structures of governance, finance and ownership are not easily confined to national borders, the professionalism of journalism is challenged by citizen-journalists, and what we might count as Internet content becomes almost limitless.

One concept which seeks to explain fundamental changes in political communication, and beyond, is mediatization. **Winfried Schulz** poses two questions in his chapter. First, to what extent does the notion of mediatization interface with the inspiring ideas introduced by Jay Blumler? And second, what can mediatization proponents learn from his analyses of the modern publicity process? Taking Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh's seminal 1999 article, 'The Third Age of Political Communication', as a starting point, Schulz discusses three propositions developed in further studies: the presence of communication media as an impetus for social change, often alongside other '-izations' such as individualization and commercialization; the increasing social importance of media technologies as they evolve, linked to notions of media power; and finally, political reactions and adaptations to perceived increased media importance, with political actors utilizing media for their own strategic interests. Schulz questions whether mediatization provides a brand new approach, but it could present a potential perspective which has not yet been fully advanced, especially with its focus on various political actors and their anticipative and adaptive responses, rather than emphasizing the (negative) tendencies of political journalism. Systems approaches and theoretical concepts such as mediatization offer comprehensive means to compare the institutions, cultures and contexts of various countries, with the further possibility for mapping continuities and transformations in longitudinal studies. Ensuring that the instruments or tools selected for measurement and analysis provide the most illuminating and representative portrait for each country involved is only one of the challenges facing those who 'go comparative' in an era of what can feel like warp-speed developments in media technologies and the accompanying political responses. Mediatization stresses the central role of media in society, but exactly what form that media takes raises serious issues for political communication researchers, with a concurrent, and possibly contradictory, dispersal of media influence, in the sense of the traditional roles of elite press, public service broadcasting and political commentators acting as key intermediaries or gatekeepers.



## **Part II: Journalism, Democracy and the Public Interest**

The chapters in Part II pick up another key aspect of Blumler's work, exploring the media's connection to the public interest and how this might be strengthened through appropriate policy and regulation. It is commonplace to say that media and especially journalistic media serve the public interest through the role they play in a democracy, but then how effectively they perform this role is disputed. To say that democracy is well served by media, we need media that hold governments and powerful economic groups to account, host meaningful public discussion across different perspectives, and provide citizens with independent and high-quality information. However, the evidence suggests that media are unlikely to achieve these things if left to their own devices in an unregulated market, something which has become more apparent in recent years as media have become increasingly marketized and so subject to economic forces. As Jay stressed in his work on public service broadcasting (Blumler, 1992) and in his more recent work on the Internet's potential to support a 'more deliberative democracy' (Coleman and Blumler, 2009), ensuring the media serve the public interest requires appropriate policy interventions. **Denis McQuail's** chapter re-examines the media's connection with the public interest and the democratic public sphere. McQuail surveys the shifts that have taken place in media and political communication since Jay's early research in the 1960s. Over this period, changes in media systems and government policy have meant that economic imperatives have tended to take priority over the media's contribution to democracy, with the result that 'the potential of new means and systems for enhanced communicativity is largely being left to chance and the market'. However, McQuail argues that the principles of the public interest and the public sphere, which shaped early media and political communication research, remain valid and important guides for future research and policy. He calls for new thinking on the public sphere that is informed by comparative media research and studies of the use of media across generations, and which explores the changing nature of key mediators and communicators. Following Jay's lead, such research should keep normative principles in mind while also being empirically rigorous and focused on what is practically achievable.

Taking up McQuail's challenge, **Stephen Cushion** and **Bob Franklin** examine the principle of public service media and its enduring importance in realizing the media's contribution to the public interest and democracy. In the face of technological change and the growing marketization

of media, the principle of public service media has increasingly been put in question, becoming more 'vulnerable', as Jay warned in his own writing on public service broadcasting (Blumler, 1992). But the empirical evidence suggests that public service media is more, not less, important today. Citing studies of television news coverage, Cushion and Franklin argue that the news produced by public service broadcasters has maintained its high standards and is distinct from and more trusted by the public than its commercial counterparts. Meanwhile, the newspaper industry – where the principle of the free market prevails – is facing significant financial pressures, and the quality of the journalism is deteriorating as a result. Against the current move towards the marketization of media, Cushion and Franklin conclude that we should focus instead on extending the principle of public service into areas where the market prevails. 'Regulation of newspapers', they conclude, 'may be required as much as for broadcast media if the values of public service are to inform the production of news in the public interest alongside, but superior to the influence of the marketplace'.

Drawing on a wide range of empirical research, **David Weaver's** chapter takes stock of what we know about journalism today and reflects on its future. Survey research indicates that journalists remain committed to public service and producing news in the public interest. He also finds that journalism continues to play a powerful role in shaping public opinion and the political agenda. However, like Cushion and Franklin, Weaver points to the significant financial pressures affecting the newspaper industry in the United States and elsewhere, which means there are fewer journalists employed, and the professional autonomy of those who remain is increasingly curtailed. Weaver concludes by considering how the future of journalism can be ensured, arguing that 'whatever happens, it seems that high-quality journalism is too important to democratic forms of government to let it wither away'. While media and political communication researchers have rightly stressed its essential democratic role, Weaver concludes that research is now urgently needed on the economics of journalism in order to solve the increasingly pressing problem of how to make it financially sustainable.

In his chapter, **James Stanyer** examines the regulation of the press in the wake of the recent phone-hacking scandal in the UK, an event which led to the closure of a prominent weekly tabloid newspaper and the British prime minister's initiation of an inquiry into 'the culture, practices, and ethics of the press' (Leveson, 2012). Stanyer argues that the tabloid press in the UK, driven by economic objectives, often falls far short of ideal normative accounts of journalism's democratic role.