

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS AND DEMOCRATIC VALUES

Michael Gurevitch and Jay G. Blumler

Editor's Note

Power is a relative concept in the realm of politics. How much power human institutions are able to wield hinges on competing players in the political game and on the tasks they need to perform with the resources they control. These players play multiple games simultaneously, which often forces them into strategies of uneasy compromise.

Michael Gurevitch and Jay G. Blumler outline the rules of the mass media game in democratic societies and point out how these rules must be modified in complex political and economic environments. Their analysis makes it clear that media power, like the power of other social institutions, must always be appraised in light of the historical and social context.

When this essay was written Gurevitch was a professor of journalism and director of the Center for Research in Public Communication at the University of Maryland. Jay G. Blumler, a former director of the Center for Television Research at the University of Leeds in England, was associate director of the Center for Research in Public Communication at the University of Maryland. Both scholars have written extensively on political communication topics. This selection comes from *Democracy and the Mass Media*, ed. Judith Lichtenberg (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), chap. 9.

The American media system is presumably animated by certain democratic principles. Some of these concern the relationship of the mass media to government—for example, the proposition that, acting on behalf of the citizenry, the media should guard against abuses of power by officeholders. Others concern the relationship of the mass media to diverse opinion

From "Political Communication Systems and Democratic Values," 269–287 in *Democracy and the Mass Media*, by Judith Lichtenberg, © 1990, Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

sources—for example, the proposition that the media should provide a robust, uninhibited, and wide-open marketplace of ideas, in which opposing views may meet, contend, and take each other's measure. Yet others concern the relationship of the mass media to the public at large—for example, the propositions that they should serve the public's "right to know" and offer options for meaningful political choices and nourishment for effective participation in civic affairs.

Yet, a glance at the world of the American media today reveals a landscape dominated by a few giant media corporations. These enterprises may be as remote from the people as are other powerful and dominant institutions in society. Their inner workings are rarely opened to voluntary outside scrutiny. And they seem committed to the presentation, not of a broad spectrum of ideas, but of mainstream opinion currents, whose flows are bounded politically by the two-party system, economically by the imperatives of private enterprise capitalism, and culturally by the values of a consumer society.

This essay deals with the tensions and disparities between the ostensibly democratic ideals that the mass media are supposed to serve and the communication structures and practices that actually prevail. We argue that such disparities undermine the capacity of the system to serve these democratic ideals. Our diagnosis rests on some broad assumptions that are stated, elaborated, and illustrated in the following sections.

Democratic Expectations of Media Performance

Democracy is a highly exacting creed in its expectations of the mass media. It requires that the media perform and provide a number of functions and services for the political system. Among the more significant are:

1. Surveillance of the sociopolitical environment, reporting developments likely to impinge, positively or negatively, on the welfare of citizens
2. Meaningful agenda-setting, identifying the key issues of the day, including the forces that have formed and may resolve them
3. Platforms for an intelligible and illuminating advocacy by politicians and spokespersons of other causes and interest groups
4. Dialogue across a diverse range of views, as well as between power holders (actual and prospective) and mass publics
5. Mechanisms for holding officials to account for how they have exercised power
6. Incentives for citizens to learn, choose, and become involved, rather than merely to follow and kibitz over the political process
7. A principled resistance to the efforts of forces outside the media to subvert their independence, integrity, and ability to serve the audience

8. A sense of respect for the audience member, as potentially concerned and able to make sense of his or her political environment

But it is no easy matter to achieve and serve these goals. At least four kinds of obstacles hinder their attainment.

First, conflicts among democratic values themselves may necessitate trade-offs and compromises in the organization and performance of the media. There are tensions, for example, between the principle of editorial autonomy and the ideal of offering individuals and groups wide-ranging access to the media. The aim of serving the public by catering to its immediate tastes and interests is likely to conflict with the aim of providing what the public *needs* to know. Media organizations are also confronted by the conflict between a majoritarian concentration on mainstream opinions and interests and the rights of dissident and marginal views to be heard.

Second, authoritative political communicators often appear to exist in an elite world of their own, distanced from the circumstances and perspectives of ordinary people. In fact, political communication could virtually be defined as the transmission of messages and pressures to and from individuals who are demonstrably unequal: the highly informed and the abysmally ignorant, the highly powerful and the pitifully powerless, the highly involved and the blissfully indifferent. Thus, the very structure of political communication involves a division between movers and shakers at the top and bystanders below, imposing limits on the participatory energy the system can generate.

Third, not everyone in the audience for political communication is a political animal, nor is obliged to be. On the one hand, a viable democracy presupposes an engaged citizenry; on the other hand, one of the freedoms the members of a liberal society enjoy is the freedom to define for themselves their stance toward the political system, including the right to be politically apathetic. As a result, political messages are doubly vulnerable. For one thing, they must jostle and compete for limited time and space with other, often more entertaining and beguiling, kinds of messages. They are not guaranteed a favored share of our attention. For another, their ultimate dependence on winning and holding the attention of a heterogeneous audience can inhibit the media from committing themselves wholeheartedly to the democratic task.

Fourth, the media can pursue democratic values only in ways that are compatible with the sociopolitical and economic environment in which they operate. Political communication arrangements follow the contours of and derive their resources from the society of which they are a part. Even when formally autonomous and sheltered by sacrosanct constitutional guarantees of a free press, they are part and parcel of the larger social system, perform-

ing functions for it and impelled to respond to predominant drives within it. In the United States, for example, media organizations are large business enterprises and first and foremost must survive (and if possible prosper) in a highly competitive marketplace. Their pursuit of their democratic role is inexorably shaped by that overriding economic goal. Politically, too, media institutions are linked inextricably to the governing institutions of society, not least because of their mutual dependence as suppliers of raw materials (government to media) and channels of publicity (media to government). In fact, a central issue in current research on the "agenda setting" role of the mass media is the degree to which they exercise a discretionary power to highlight certain issues for public attention, as against the degree to which they depend on the policy initiatives of the big power battalions whose activities and statements they report.¹

Some Redeeming Features

However constraining such pressures and problems, symbolically at least, journalism in the Western liberal democracies does reflect the influence of democratic values.

For example, the news media provide a daily parade of political disagreement and conflict. In that way what appears regularly in the news is a standing refutation of the antidemocratic notion that there is some single valid social purpose for pursuit through politics and some single group that is entitled to monopolize power because it alone knows what that purpose is and how best to realize it. In addition, the existence of a free press enshrines the democratic concept of the political accountability of power holders to ordinary citizens. Much of what the press reports in political affairs can be thought of as designed to encourage audience members to judge how what the government has been doing relates to their interests, problems, and concerns. Similarly, a free press can be said to embody the notion of citizen autonomy. It implicitly stands for the assumption that readers, viewers, and listeners are offered material on the basis of which they can make up their own minds about who the "good guys" and the "bad guys" in politics are.

Beyond what it represents symbolically, the press in a democratic society can be seen as performing an indispensable, bridging function in democratic politics. Inevitably, an enormous gulf stretches between the political world and ordinary people's perceptions of it. Although political decisions may affect people's lives in many ways, from *their* perspective the political world often seems remote, confusing, and boring. What the press does, it might be argued, is to bring developments in this distant and difficult arena within the reach of the average person in terms that he or she can understand. Viewed in this light, certain features of political reporting may be regarded as enticements to become involved in political questions, ways of

interesting the public in affairs for which they might feel little prior enthusiasm. So the crowd-pulling appeal of journalism, the tendency to dramatize, the projection of hard-hitting conflict, the use of sporting analogies to awaken a horse race-like excitement, are, in this view, inducements to become interested in and aware of political matters. Even the media's proclivity toward the dramatic may be applauded in this spirit. A dramatic story can be treated as a peg for more information about the wider political context in which it occurred.

Even the much criticized tendency of the press to trade in simple stereotypes can be viewed in this light. As Winfried Schulz has put it, "In order to make politics comprehensible to the citizen, it must first be reduced by journalists to a few simple structural patterns."² This, of course, echoes Walter Lippmann's classic observation on the role of the press as constructors of "pictures in our minds."³ Personalization, the penchant for clear-cut issues, the tendency to reduce most political conflicts to only two sides of the argument—all might be thought of as aids to popular understanding.

Yet such a positive evaluation ignores three problems. First, surveys of what audience members actually glean from the news demonstrate that it is a highly inefficient mechanism for conveying information.⁴ Second, there are few signs that media personnel seriously try to verify for themselves how much information and insight their audiences get out of news reports, with a prospect of changing their news-telling ways accordingly. Third, with many journalistic practices the means seem to have become the end. An election campaign is predominantly treated as (not like) a horse race.⁵ Journalists and their audiences are more often stalled on the bridge than transported to a more enlightened land beyond it.

Systemic Constraints

... We will consider the role of [systemic] constraints at four different levels of the political communication system: the societal level, the inter-institutional level, the intra-institutional level, and the audience level.

The Societal Level

We have already suggested that the production and dissemination of political messages occur within a web of economic, political, and cultural subsystems, which exert "pressure" on the media to select certain issues rather than others as subjects for public attention; to frame their stories according to favored scenarios; and to give the views of certain groups and individuals privileged treatment and heightened exposure. Such pressures need not be applied overtly or deliberately. Indeed, our emphasis on political communication as a systemic product reflects our view that the reciprocal flow of influence between the media and other social institutions is a more or less

"natural" and mutually accepted phenomenon, tending to reproduce the power relations and reciprocal dependencies that obtain between them. And it is the varying linkages between such institutions, including closer relations and more powerful dependencies in some cases and more remote links and lesser dependencies in others, that may result in various constraints on "communications for democracy."

We can examine media linkages to the *economic* environment via the structure of ownership and control and via the dynamics of supply and demand in a commercial marketplace. Researchers have paid some attention to the former, where current trends point to an increased concentration of ownership in fewer hands, as well as a process of conglomeration, placing media organizations within larger corporate structures controlled by non-media interests.⁶ Owners of media outlets may leave editors free to follow their own political and professional leanings; yet the potential for influencing editorial policy is clearly present. . . .

Market mechanisms may threaten democratic aspirations when two or more media organizations compete for a large and heterogeneous mass audience. Such circumstances are likely to generate pressures to:

1. *Limit the amount of public affairs coverage, and shift its style from the serious and extended to the entertaining and arresting:* There is simply no way in which an hour-long news show could be ventured on American commercial network television, although local stations do offer such programs. These, however, constitute a mixture of "hard" and "soft" local news, sometimes bordering on "infotainment."
2. *Impose format rigidities on public affairs coverage:* Even in election campaigns, the nightly news shows on American network television cannot be extended beyond their twenty-two-minute ration; nor can their commercials be retimed to create room for longer and more coherent reports.
3. *Deal blandly with social issues in non-news programming:* Many advertisers have guidelines on acceptable and unacceptable program features for their commercials, enforced through a pre-screening of episodes to be aired.

Of course, *political* constraints on the media can take different forms, ranging from direct political controls, through overt political pressures to promote or suppress specific contents, to strategies for steering journalists toward favored stories and away from less favored ones, to a more subtle reliance on informal channels and contacts. Much has been said and written about this area,⁷ and it requires little further elaboration, except to point out that ultimately the media's ability to withstand such pressures turns on their

credibility for doing the sort of job they claim to be undertaking and for serving the audience properly.

Another form of political "control," however, is less often noticed. Powerful institutions in society are powerful at least in part because they can plausibly claim authority over the definition of the issues falling in their spheres. This is to imply not that critics are silenced but that they often have to make their case on grounds not of their own choosing. Thus, the police are perceived to be the authority on issues of law and order;⁸ the Treasury and the Federal Reserve Bank, on the state of the economy; the Pentagon, on defense and military matters; and the President of the United States is the "primary definer" of what constitutes the "national interest." Not surprisingly, when journalists seek an authoritative perspective on a certain field of issues, they turn to those officials who are defined by their positions as authoritative sources.⁹ Media professionals do not see this practice as a violation of the canon of objectivity, since the sources are consulted precisely for their presumed expertise and not merely as proponents of a certain point of view. Alternative definitions of social issues are then disadvantaged—either not represented at all, given short shrift, or labeled as "interested" and "biased."

Social systems also structure a pecking order of status and prestige, giving those higher up the ladder a better chance of having their affairs reported in line with their own perspectives. Thus, certain institutions are commonly accorded respect, even reverence, in the news—for example, the institutions of the presidency and the Supreme Court (though not necessarily the incumbents in these positions), and the British royal family. Some enjoy a benign neglect. Some evoke a mixture of symbolic deference and pragmatic exploitation (for example, the British Parliament).¹⁰ Some mainly suffer the slings and arrows of straight news-values fortunes (often trade unions). Some can get attention only if they stir up trouble (e.g., political "terrorists"). Elsewhere, we have outlined a conceptual framework for analyzing news personnel's orientations toward social institutions, based on a continuum between more sacerdotal and more pragmatic approaches to institutional reporting.¹¹ We argued that social institutions that are regarded as the symbolic embodiment of the core values of their society tend to elicit portrayals of their activities as if "through their own eyes." Conversely, the treatment of institutions, groups, and individuals that represent less central values, or dissident and deviant values, is likely to be guided more strictly by journalists' news values.

The Inter-Institutional Level

In modern political communication systems mediated political messages are a subtly composite product, reflecting the contributions and interactions

of two different types of communications: advocates and journalists. Each side is striving to realize different goals vis-à-vis the audience; yet it cannot normally pursue these without securing the cooperation of the other side. Politicians need access to the communication channels operated by media organizations, and they must adjust their messages to the demands of formats and genres that have been devised inside such organizations. Nor can journalists perform their task of political reporting without access to politicians for interviews, news, and comment. Thus, the practice of addressing citizens is something of a compromise for both groups of communicators. It is not merely that they have different goals. It is also that in order to proceed at all, they must work through and with the other side. And from this interwoven process three problems of democratic communication arise.

First, there is a potential for blurring institutional functions that ideally ought to be kept distinct. For their part, politicians start to think, speak, and behave like journalists—a tendency epitomized by presidential statements couched in one-liners designed to guide and ease the work of newspaper headline writers and to give television reporters pithy ten-second sound bites. For their part, journalists, despite their professional values, may be reduced to virtual channels of propaganda. This poses a dilemma for the media. When politicians can predict confidently which events and comments will ring reportorial bells, media professionals are deprived of opportunities to exercise their own judgment. (This line of self-criticism became especially visible in postmortem analyses of the media's role in the 1988 presidential campaign.) Yet the routines that open the media to such manipulation cannot be discarded or overhauled without much disruption and cost. Thus, reform of the political communication process is seriously hampered by professionally rooted inertia in the media and by the coziness of the relationship between journalists and politicians, which appears to accommodate both sides, notwithstanding its occasional rough edges and adversarial explosions. This problem, too, is increasingly recognized and discussed by journalists.

Second, striking strategic developments have occurred in recent years on the advocates' side of the political communication process. Because politicians and other would-be opinion molders are competing fiercely for access to exposure in the media; because in order to achieve this they must tailor their messages to the requirements of journalists' formats, news values, and work habits; and because this is thought to demand anticipatory planning, fast footwork, and a range of specialist skills—for all these reasons, a significant degree of "source professionalization" has emerged. By this we mean the ever deeper and more extensive involvement in political message making of publicity advisers, public relations experts, campaign management consultants, and the like.

Such "source professionals" are not only farsighted, assiduous, and gifted at fashioning messages for media consumption. They immerse journalists in what appears to be an increasingly manipulative opinion environment. Perceiving themselves to be "professionals" rather than "advocates," source professionals regard newsmaking as a power struggle rather than a process of issue clarification. . . .

Third, faced with such developments, journalists become uneasy and concerned to reassert the significance of their own contribution. In fact, during an observation study we conducted at the headquarters of NBC News during the 1984 presidential election campaign, producers and correspondents talked to us about their awareness of this problem and their efforts to resolve the dilemma of reporting the activities of candidates without becoming extensions of their propaganda machines.¹² One device they have developed for this purpose has been termed "disdaining the news."¹³ This involves attempts by reporters to distance themselves from the propagandistic features of an event by suggesting that it has been contrived and should be taken with a grain of salt. . . .

Clearly such an approach has a potential for cultivating political cynicism and mistrust among viewers and further undermining the contributions of the media to the democratic process.

The Intra-Organizational Level

Significant constraints on the portrayal of social and political issues in the media also stem from factors internal to the organization of journalism, including relations between news media outlets and the values and ideologies that guide media professionals in their work.

In liberal-democratic societies, the relationship between media organizations is characterized primarily by competition—to maximize audiences, to be first with the news, or to scoop one's rivals in other ways. Thus, although competition for audience patronage is related directly to the media's economic goals, it is also rooted deeply in the professional culture of Western journalism. This diverts attention away from the aim of serving the audience toward the democratically irrelevant goal of beating the competition. One example in recent years is the competitive zeal that fueled the coverage by the television networks and CNN of the hijacked TWA plane in Beirut in 1985. Nationally that competition was geared to serve a news-hungry public, eager for information about the crisis. It soon became apparent, however, that when the reporting from Beirut ceased to carry any "news" or to have any significant informational value, it was motivated primarily by inter-network competition for the highest journalistic profile. Whether the country, the audience, or, indeed, the hostages were best served by this rivalry remained moot points.

Competition is only one force shaping the behavior of journalists. Professional values, such as objectivity, impartiality, fairness, and an ability to recognize the newsworthiness of an event, also serve as influential guidelines when framing stories. At one level, such norms provide safeguards essential to a democratic media system. They prescribe that reporters should stand above the political battle, serve the audience rather than politicians with partisan axes to grind, and do so with due regard for all the interests at stake in an issue. But at another level, the routinized application of such values can have distorting consequences. Many writers have pointed out, for example, that the neutral stance enjoined by the values of objectivity and impartiality can lend implicit support to the more powerful institutions and groups in society and for the social order from which they benefit.¹⁴ Instead of promoting a "marketplace of ideas," in which all viewpoints are given adequate play, media neutrality can tend to privilege dominant, mainstream positions.

Adherence to professional definitions of news values may also act as a powerful force for conformity, for arriving, that is, at a common answer, across an otherwise diverse set of news outlets, to the question, What is the most significant news today?¹⁵ Widely shared and professionally endorsed definitions of news values may force journalists' hand in other ways. For example, during our election observation study at NBC, one reporter, assigned to cover Geraldine Ferraro, described to us how within thirty seconds of her selection by Mondale as his running mate she was typecast by news editors and producers as the "first woman Vice-Presidential candidate."¹⁶ His own wish to report her in terms, say, of the compatibility of her campaign utterances with her voting record in the House of Representatives, was rejected by editors as not part of "the Ferraro story," and a later attempt to place the same item ran into the obstacle that by then the dominant theme of "the Ferraro story" had become her response to the issue of her family finances. Revealed here is how widely shared news values can severely constrain the range of options within which reporters themselves can deal with political issues and leaders. Clearly, such tendencies constrict the potential of the media to serve as a genuine "marketplace of ideas" or to transcend the boundaries of the social and political mainstream. . . .

The Audience Level

What role does the audience play in a democratic media system? Ideally, its needs and interests should be uppermost. In practice, the media promptly heed any sign of decided audience dislike or rejection of certain ways of addressing it—if, that is, the media's competitive goals are perceived to be at risk as a result. In that sense, the audience holds a sort of reserve veto power.

Such sensitivity to audience attitudes may be interpreted as reflecting the media's democratic impulses. Nevertheless, there are systemic reasons why

the audience for political communication is vulnerable to neglect and misrepresentation. Of the three main elements in a political communication system—politicians, journalists, and audience members—it is the audience that, though most numerous, is least powerful, because least organized. Amid their preoccupations with the intricacies, problems, calculations, and subtleties of coping with one another, politicians and journalists are liable to lose sight of the ordinary voter's concerns and instead attempt to accommodate one another. Thus, audiences are "known" to the media primarily as statistical aggregates produced by ratings services and market researchers, and the media's orientation to their audiences is dominated by numbers. Three problems arise from these circumstances.

First, research suggests strongly that if useful information is to be effectively conveyed to people through the mass media, a sine qua non is sensitivity to what the audience wants or needs to know.¹⁷ The system does not foster such sensitivity.

Second, an audience known mainly through numbers is open to oversimplification, stereotyping, even contempt. This is illustrated by the comment of a news executive we interviewed during our observation study at NBC in 1984, who said: "The only thing that viewers want to know about this election is who is going to win."

Third, this statement (taken in conjunction with other similarly pithy maxims about audience propensities that gain currency in the lore of media executives) illustrates a feature of widely held audience images that contributes to the entrenchment of the system: Authoritative communicators tend to dismiss the audience *as if it were capable only of absorbing what the system supplies*. A deeply conservative view of the audience is thus propagated, one that reinforces the communication status quo. . . .

Notes

1. Philip Tichenor, "Agenda-Setting: Media as Political Kingmakers?" *Journalism Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (1982); Michael Gurevitch and Jay G. Blumler, "Sources of Cross-national Differences in the Discretionary Power of the Mass Media: A Conceptual Introduction," in Holli Smetko et al., *The Formation of Campaign Agendas: A Comparative Analysis of Party and Media Roles in Recent American and British Elections* (Hillside, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1992).
2. Winfried Schulz, "One Campaign or Nine?" in *Communicating to Voters: The Role of Television in the First European Parliamentary Elections*, ed. Jay G. Blumler (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1983).
3. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1922).
4. E.g., John Robinson and Mark R. Levy, *The Main Source* (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1986).

5. Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "The Election Agenda-setting Rules of Television Journalists: Comparative Observation at the BBC and NBC," in Semetko et al., *The Formation of Campaign Agendas*.
6. E.g., Graham Murdock, "Large Corporations and the Control of the Communication Industries," in *Culture, Society and the Media*, ed. Michael Gurevitch et al. (London: Methuen, 1982); Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1987).
7. See, e.g., Colin Seymour-Ure, *The Political Impact of Mass Media* (London: Constable, 1974); Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "Towards a Comparative Framework for Political Communication Research," in *Political Communication: Issues and Strategies for Research*, ed. Steven Chaffee (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage, 1975); Anthony Smith, ed., *Television and Political Life: Studied in Six European Countries* (London: Macmillan, 1979).
8. Steve Chibnall, *Law-and-Order-News* (London: Tavistock, 1974).
9. Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1978); Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978); Mark Fishman, *Manufacturing the News* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980); Herbert Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon, 1979).
10. See Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch, "Journalists' Orientations to Political Institutions: The Case of Parliamentary Broadcasting," in *Communicating Politics*, ed. Peter Golding et al. (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1986).
11. Ibid.
12. See note 5, above.
13. Mark R. Levy, "Disdaining the News," *Journal of Communication* 31 (1981).
14. Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis*.
15. Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1973); Timothy Crouse, *The Boys on the Bus* (New York: Random House, 1973).
16. See note 5.
17. Kjell Nowak, "From Information Gaps to Communication Potential," in *Current Theories in Scandinavian Mass Communication*, ed. M. Berg et al. (Grenaa, Denmark: GMT, 1977); Robinson and Levy, *The Main Source*.