

Democratic Theory and the History of Communications*

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To argue about the media today is almost inevitably to argue about politics. Similarly, at a deeper level, conflicting views of the history of communications often reflect disagreements about democracy and its possibilities. Much of the foundational thought about communications—from the writings of Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in the 1920s and ‘30s to the work of Jürgen Habermas and others in recent decades—has held wide intellectual interest because of its implications for democratic theory and politics. Has the media’s development advanced or devastated democratic hopes? Is the public a mere “phantom,” in Lippmann’s phrase, or can it be an active force in popular self-government if the media furnish the necessary information and means of criticism and debate?¹ Many of us who study the history of communications do so because of its relevance to the bigger, unfinished political story about the origins of democracy, the struggles over its extension, and the continuing efforts to realize aspirations for a more vital democratic politics. Like journalists, however, historians are often loath to address questions of political theory, and some may believe that just as it is better to travel light, so it is better to do history without any theoretical baggage. But whether or not historians and other analysts of the media make any use of theory, their understanding of democracy influences what they make of the past.

Democratic theory comes in many varieties, but here I want only to distinguish three general perspectives, each of which represents not a single position, but a composite of related ideas. None of these perspectives rejects the framework of representative government and rights of free speech and a free press that are embodied in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. In that sense, all belong to the tradition of liberal, constitutional democracy, though they interpret the tradition differently.

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Three Conceptions of Democracy

The first of the three perspectives—let us call it “minimalist”—conceives of democracy, in Joseph Schumpeter’s famous definition, as an institutional arrangement in which individuals acquire the power to make political decisions “by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”² In this view, the key criterion for democracy is free competitive elections, which serve as a means of adding up voters’ preferences and holding officials accountable for their performance. The minimalist view may therefore be described as aggregative, adversarial, and majoritarian. In conceptualizing democracy as a contest for individual voting preferences, this version of democratic theory sees politics as analogous to a market. Just as competition in an industry takes place among firms, so competition in the political marketplace takes place among elite groups. The minimalist view does not demand extensive popular engagement in politics; according to the theory of rational ignorance, voters typically do not pay close attention to the details of public policy because they have scant likelihood of influencing the outcome and can maximize their utility by attending to their own private lives and livelihoods. At election time, however, they are able to use party labels and other signals to make voting choices that satisfactorily reflect their preferences.

In regard to communications, the minimalist view calls for freedom of speech and the press in the sense of non-interference by the state—that is, negative liberty—to allow for an open contest for electoral support and to prevent those in office from perpetuating their own rule. By analogy, if democracy is a competitive struggle for the people’s vote, so a democratic media system is properly conceived as a competitive struggle for readers, listeners, viewers, and Internet traffic—in short, for ratings. The minimalist democrat is not greatly disturbed if competition in a media market drives out hard news and public affairs programs in favor of entertainment. That is a reflection of individual free choice and rational ignorance. Just as voters delegate decisions to elected officials in a representative system, so they leave public policy to experts. High concentrations of media ownership in particular industries also do not necessarily upset the minimalist. According to a line of economic analysis also descended from Schumpeter, the threat from a new technology or from invasion of a market by rivals in an adjacent industry is typically sufficient to keep would-be monopolists in line. The key criterion in deciding

whether ownership concentration is excessive is not whether a market has active competition but whether it is potentially “contestable.” And, happily enough, most markets usually are.

At the opposite end of the theoretical spectrum is a conception of democracy that calls for the active engagement of citizens in public affairs and an equal distribution of power in society. According to exponents of radical, participatory, or “strong” democracy, the aggregative and adversarial model offers too “thin” an ideal and too passive a model of citizenship. For there to be genuine popular rule, there must be more than a contest among elites for popular favor. In this view, democratic principles ought to apply not simply to elections, but also between elections to the process of government and to other economic and social institutions. Only in this thorough-going way can political inequality be overcome.³

In regard to communications, the radical democrat sees the market as a corrupting influence that degrades political discussion and reinforces what used to be described as the cultural hegemony of the capitalist class and is now usually just characterized as the dominance or “monopoly” of big media corporations. If the public is inattentive to public affairs, it is because the political system and the media have failed to engage them. As the old radical maxim goes, the cure for the ailments of democracy is more democracy. While the minimalist sees the First Amendment as demanding non-interference by the government in the press, the radical democrat sees the same rights as demanding plenty of interference to break up media monopolies, counteract commercialism, and create an informed citizenry. In the radical view, the rights assured by the First Amendment are not the rights of the companies that own the press or other media to be free of governmental interference; rather, in the words of Robert McChesney and Ben Scott, the First Amendment guarantees “a social right shared equally by all citizens in a democracy ... to be exposed to a wide range of uncensored, informed analysis of social affairs.”⁴

Between these two antithetical theories of democracy and conceptions of constitutional rights lies a third perspective, with different implications for communications. According to this view, democracy is a system of “government by discussion,” which requires that all those interested in influencing political decisions offer reasons justifying their positions in terms of generally accepted values. Instead of

simply aggregating preferences, therefore, democratic politics also serves as a means of eliciting and weighing public arguments, and instead of merely pitting elites against each other in an adversarial contest, democracy calls for mutual respect between those on opposing sides and seeks to create a basis for cooperation that transcends particular moral and political disagreements. In the language of Amy Guttmann and Dennis Thompson as well as other political philosophers, this is a “deliberative” rather than “aggregative” model of democracy or, to use the terms that Ronald Dworkin has recently proposed, it is a “partnership” model of democracy rather than a purely “majoritarian” conception.⁵ The deliberative or partnership approach does not presuppose that power must be equally distributed among citizens, nor does it count on high levels of everyday popular engagement in public affairs. These goals, while admirable, are so removed from the realities of modern society that they cannot be conditions for political legitimacy. Even without equal power and a general political awakening, however, public deliberation can serve critical purposes: to focus attention on the public good rather than private and partial interests, to bring failures and mistakes to light and thereby lead to the discovery of more effective policies, to promote equality of respect in public life, and to make political decisions more legitimate by subjecting them to scrutiny and counterargument.

The lineage of the deliberative ideal is traceable to liberal and republican thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, above all to John Stuart Mill, though Mill’s conception of government by discussion still limited it largely to a political elite. As Guttmann and Thompson point out, it was with Dewey and others in the early twentieth century, and later with Habermas, that the deliberative ideal acquired a more democratic cast. Many radical democrats also invoke the values of deliberation, but there is a tension between the participatory and deliberative ideals. Deliberation requires listening to arguments on all sides, but according to empirical research on face-to-face communication, many people are willing to participate only in like-minded groups.⁶ The liberal deliberative perspective, unlike the radical one, also does not regard big profit-making corporations as irredeemable but instead holds that with the proper legal rules and incentives, public policy can harness the creativity and dynamism of the market for public purposes.

The liberal deliberative view has direct implications for communications. Because the quality of public discussion matters for deliberative democracy, there is reason to be concerned if market forces drive out public-affairs programming and serious journalism. Rather than overturning the market and commercialism, however, the deliberative liberal is concerned with getting incentives right through reforms of the legal framework of the media and with fostering independent efforts in civil society. The liberal deliberative view does not accept the proposition that the media flourish only when the government observes a rule of non-interference in the market; in myriad ways—postal policies, broadcast licensing decisions, intellectual property laws, laws governing libel, and much else—the state has always intervened, and these interventions have been vital for the growth of well-functioning markets. But the deliberative liberal also does not share the radical view that the First Amendment guarantees citizens a right to be exposed to diverse viewpoints and that this right trumps that of the press and other media to be free of government regulation. Rather, within the bounds of the First Amendment, the Congress may decide, as a matter of good policy, to promote a diversity of sources of opinion and information, as it has through postal policies and subsidies to public broadcasting. And, with the same concerns in mind, the government may constitutionally make provisions for the financing of political campaigns to encourage fair and sustained debate between political candidates. If democracy is not only about the aggregation of preferences on election day, but also about the communicative process for arriving at decisions by voters and their representatives—if the aim is not simply an adversarial contest, but also an effort to discover deeper grounds of cooperation and agreement—then communication policy, in the broadest sense, is integral to the health of a democracy.

The Historiographic Implications of Democratic Theory

A potential objection at this point might be that while these different theories of democracy may lead to different evaluations of developments past and present, they ought not to affect the ascertainment of historical facts. And, indeed, historians with different conceptions of democracy should be able agree not only on specific facts, but also on how to characterize many broader developments. None of these perspectives, as I said earlier, rejects representative government or the Bill of Rights. Neither would they

necessarily lead to disagreement about whether, for example, the expansion of the franchise, the growth of literacy, the rise of a popular press, and the creation of ubiquitous communication networks have led to a more democratic society. The differing implications of these perspectives on democracy become apparent, however, in the interpretation of developments critical to the basic narrative line of communications history in three broad periods—what might be called the “founding era” in the eighteenth century, the age of mass media in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the rise of a post-broadcast, networked public sphere that we are living through today.

The minimalist theory of democracy tends, on the whole, toward a narrative of progress—of increasing democratization of culture and politics. From this perspective, the great watershed of communications history in the founding era in England and America was the achievement of negative liberty—the end of state censorship and the establishment of freedom of the press—along with the institutionalization of electoral competition. In the minimalist democrat’s view, the growth of a popular commercial press in the nineteenth century represented a further extension of democracy. Indeed, in the analysis of the economist James Hamilton, new technology and market forces in the second half of the nineteenth century led to the development of independent, nonpartisan journalism. Seeking the widest possible circulation to spread high fixed costs and to boost advertising revenues, newspaper publishers rationally abandoned partisan identities that limited their readership.⁷ (Hamilton characteristically neglects the political side of the story, never asking why political parties and government officials first sponsored their own newspapers and later stopped channeling subsidies to them.) From the minimalist viewpoint, the later rise of mass media such as radio and television confirmed the overarching tendency toward the multiplication of sources of information and opinion, whatever the limits within particular industries. Changes in the post-broadcast era, moreover, have overcome many of these earlier limits, such as the restricted number of television channels, creating an even more open media system, which complements and supports the electoral competition that is democracy’s decisive feature. From a Schumpeterian perspective, the “gales of creative destruction” set in motion by the rise of the Internet may well bring about the collapse or retrenchment of obsolete forms of media, such as the daily printed newspaper. But effects of this kind are to be expected

and, amid the new information cornucopia, they ought not to occasion remorse, much less new forms of government intervention.

The radical democratic interpretation of these developments is dramatically different. If the minimalist tends toward a narrative of progress, the radical offers a narrative of struggle and betrayal. Like the minimalist, the radical democrat also stakes a claim to the legacy of the founding era in the eighteenth century. In the Habermas version of the story, the public sphere of the eighteenth century, though dominated by the bourgeoisie, provided a genuine means by which private individuals could come together as a public to confront the state with the force of reason, as opposed to the later sham public sphere of the commercial mass media.⁸ Or as McChesney interprets the First Amendment and America's early newspaper subsidies, which supported numerous local publications, the founding fathers didn't intend to create a system of media monopolies.⁹ With this backdrop, the radical democratic interpretation views the rise of commercial mass media under the control of large corporations as a betrayal of the original promise of the public sphere and a free press. The emphasis of the radical interpretation is on the suppression of alternatives: suppression, first of all, of the voices of marginalized groups and dissident journalists and, secondly, of alternative policies that might have limited the dominance of the corporate media. For example, instead of favoring the rise of a few powerful radio networks, the early licensing decisions in the 1920s and 1930s could have fostered a strong nonprofit or public broadcasting sector from the start. In the radical narrative, the long-term trend of media markets is toward monopoly, where the term "monopoly" is being used, not in the strict economic sense of control over a market by a single firm, but rather to refer to control by a single type of firm—the profit-making corporation. And, against the view that technological change in the post-broadcast era, particularly the rise of the Internet, has created a more open media system, the radical narrative stresses the growing scale of the biggest media corporations and emphasizes their extensive of radio stations, continued command of the prime-time TV audience, and dominance even of Internet traffic. Still, amid these dire trends, the radical democrat spies rays of hope in occasional bursts of public protest over the power of the big media.

Whenever writers present a series of three viewpoints of which the first two represent polar opposites, you can usually count on the third position to be offered as the

most sensible of all. I will not disappoint you, though I want first to offer some words in praise of the first two interpretations. The minimalist, Schumpeterian conception of democracy has conspicuous advantages for comparative political and social research. As the term “minimalist” suggests, it identifies a lower-bound criterion for democracy (whether or not there are free competitive elections), and as a result it is relatively easy to determine whether any particular country at a given time satisfies the threshold conditions for democracy and to create either a dichotomous classification of governments or a scale measuring electoral competition and the protection of supporting rights such as freedom of the press.¹⁰ In contrast, the radical conception of democracy, with its emphasis on active citizenship and equal power, is based on aspirational criteria that are not only hard to measure but nowhere satisfied on a national scale. The radical conception has its advantages not in comparative research but as a critical standpoint in understanding the limits of democracy where democracy has flourished most. It reminds us of alternatives—roads not taken and not likely to be taken—that are important not just for historical analysis, but if we are to make the most of the political possibilities that we have.

While the minimalist and radical theories make legitimate contributions, the liberal deliberative view has a particular value for the historical study of communications. Like the other two perspectives, this version of democratic theory also stakes a claim to the legacy of the founding era. The establishment of rights of free speech and a free press was indeed critical, but the political framework of communications in Britain and America involved more than negative liberty. As I have tried to show in my own work, a wide array of constitutive choices influenced the long-term developmental path of communications. In the case of the early American republic, these choices created a vibrant, at time vituperative, sphere of political debate that was closely tied to vigorous electoral competition.¹¹ The line of work derived from Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*—which in turn goes back to Dewey and was directly influenced by C. Wright Mills¹²--has illuminated that process. Habermas may idealize London coffeehouses, exaggerate the freedom of the English press of the eighteenth century, and misjudge the class character of the early reading public. Nonetheless, by framing the critical change in the early modern era not simply as a

release from censorship, but as the formation of a field for rational public argument—the public sphere—Habermas puts the deliberative conception of democracy at the center of the history of communications. If we do not romanticize the eighteenth-century public sphere, however, we also do not need to interpret the rise of the commercial mass media in the nineteenth and twentieth century as a story of degradation. Like his mentors in the Frankfurt School, Habermas has the typical continental European intellectual’s disdain for popular culture; he combines that disdain with a nostalgic and historically false image of an earlier pure, precommercial public sphere to produce a narrative of cultural decline, a theme with deep roots in German political and intellectual life.¹³ But none of this ought to be convincing to us today. Popular culture has been a rich source of innovation, and much of it has depended on the impetus of profit.

In the interpretation of democracy that I favor, the development of the mass commercial media has had a mixed, though on the whole positive, character. Here I would like to quote from the conclusion to my book *The Creation of the Media*:

... [M]arkets, however much reviled, make vital contributions to a democratic public sphere that are unlikely to be made any other way. The production of original books, movies, music, and television is inherently risky: No one knows for sure whether an audience for any new work exists beforehand. Public tastes are fickle; precisely what distinguishes a hit from a dud may be unpredictable. These uncertainties give strategic importance to those who put capital at risk. As publishers and other producers of cultural goods search for new works on which to place their bets, they are continually testing the popular appeal of new genres, styles, and subjects. This entrepreneurial activity expands the scale and scope of the public sphere, extending its known frontiers.

Sometimes even a single influential work—a book, a movie, a song—can give a latent public its voice and bring it into full awareness of itself. The discovery of a new market may thereby trigger public (and private) self-discovery and alter what politics is about. While most writers and publishers and others involved in making such choices mostly stick to familiar terrain, the industry’s hunger for new products is a spur to cultural as well as economic risk-taking. More amply capitalized organizations are better able to assume that kind of risk—and are far more likely to do so in a legal environment that protects free expression. Moreover, the growth of markets does not extinguish noncommercial interests in culture and public life. The market, even when its products are distasteful, is a continual stimulus to innovation outside the market and in reaction to it. In a dynamic sense, markets in liberal societies enrich the public sphere far more than they impoverish it. If, however, all were left to the market—if government had not promoted communications networks, the press, education, and innovation while attempting to check tendencies toward excessive

concentrations of power—the public sphere would be poor indeed. Our public life is a hybrid of capitalism and democracy, and we are better off for it, as long as the democratic side is able to keep the balance.

There is even a case to be made for the big media that have borne the brunt of the radical democratic critique. During the 1950s and '60s, at the height of the broadcast networks' power, Mills, Habermas, and others deplored the political effects of mass culture. But there is now strong evidence that network television in that era had a positive impact on the public's knowledge of politics and news. According to research by Markus Prior, when Americans typically could watch just three television stations, all of which broadcast their network's national evening news at the same time, many viewers who would have preferred entertainment watched the news because that was all there was and, in the process, became better informed and more interested in politics than they would otherwise have been. As more television channels became available, however, this group of viewers turned to such shows as the Simpsons. As a result, greater freedom of media choice led to a diminished audience for the news, less political knowledge, and lower civic engagement.¹⁴

A similar process may be taking place over a longer period among newspaper readers. The daily newspaper brings together a multiplicity of different interests, and many readers who may pick up a paper for the classified ads or for the cartoons nonetheless scan the front page and thereby become better informed about politics. The long-term loss of readership with the rise of television—and then with the changes in television that came with the increasing number of channels—may also help to account for diminishing levels of civic engagement. This process may not yet have run its full course. As the various elements that make up the general-interest newspaper become disaggregated on the Internet, readers interested in sports, entertainment, and so on may no longer inadvertently encounter as much political news as they used to.

Moreover, as the classifieds and other advertising migrate to other media, newspapers are losing the ability to cross-subsidize the more expensive kinds of journalism, such as an international and investigative reporting, which have never paid their own way. The disappearance of journalism from radio, except for public radio, may signal a process that is likely to become far more widespread. As cross-subsidies in

commercial media dry up, some of the journalism that has long been supported commercially may need new sources of nonprofit support if it is to survive at all.

At the same time, the Internet is clearly enriching the public sphere in other ways. While it may not yet support the more costly forms of journalism, it offers a vast range of opinion, reduces the barriers to entry for individual writers and new publications, and facilitates the growth of collaborative, nonmarket production online, as exemplified by such phenomena as open-source software and Wiki publications. These new forms of social production have already begun to serve some of the classic watchdog functions of the press. As Yochai Benkler has argued, the network information economy offers a platform for the public sphere that is in many respects superior to the platform created by the mass media. By reducing the cost of becoming a speaker, the Internet has enabled far greater numbers of people to enter the public debate. Furthermore, instead of simply becoming a cacophonous Babel or a series of echo chambers of fragmented and polarized views, the Web has developed a variety of peer-produced mechanisms for filtering and evaluating facts and opinions and organizing public discussion at higher levels. The promise of new political and cultural creativity is extraordinary, but technology alone does not guarantee that the potential will be realized. Some of the new developments are deeply threatening to established interests, which may use their political influence to bend law and regulation to their own advantage.¹⁵

This is a more ambiguous story than the radical narrative. Increased freedom of choice, rather than the greedy media, may be eroding civic engagement and threatening high-quality journalism, even as alternative forms of public knowledge and discussion are emerging in the networked public sphere. To realize the democratic possibilities of that new environment, however, will require not simply the government's non-interference, but a variety of critical political decisions about such areas of law as intellectual property, campaign finance, and the subsidy of underproduced public goods. The lesson of history is that just as in the past we have used government successfully to foster public debate and enrich the diversity of voices in the public sphere, so we could again. The historical narrative we need is neither one of ever brighter progress, nor one of darkening descent into the grip of monopoly capital, but a balanced account of achievements and setbacks and unfolding challenges and opportunities that can help us build a democracy where we

can talk through our disagreements and where the public can be, not just a phantom of our imagination, but the real force in government that the democratic tradition has said it should be.

¹ Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922); idem, *The Phantom Public* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1925); and John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (1927; Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 1991).

² Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 3d ed. (1942; New York: Harper & Row, 1950), 269; Adam Przeworski, “Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense,” in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker Cordón, eds., *Democracy’s Value* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23-55.

³ For an example, see Benjamin R. Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press, 1984).

⁴ Robert W. McChesney and Ben Scott, eds. *Our Unfree Press: 100 Years of Radical Media Criticism* (New York: New Press, 2004), 7.

⁵ Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004); Ronald Dworkin, *Is Democracy Possible Here? Principles for a New Political Debate* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006),

⁶ Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* (New York : Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁷ James Hamilton, *All the News That’s Fit to Sell* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989).

⁹ Robert W. McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004)

¹⁰ See, for example, Adam Przeworski et al., *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Material Well-being in the World, 1950–1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Among media researchers, Pippa Norris draws on a Schumpeterian conception; see *A Virtuous Circle: Political Communications in Postindustrial Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

¹¹ *The Creation of the Media: Political Origins of Modern Communications* (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

¹² See Chapter 13, “The Mass Society,” in C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1956).

¹³ Mass culture, Habermas writes, is successful because it meets “the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of consumer strata with relatively little education, rather than through the guidance of an enlarged public toward the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance.” *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, 168.

¹⁴ Markus Prior, *Post-Broadcast Democracy: How Media Choice Increases Inequality in Political Involvement and Polarizes Elections* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); idem, “News vs. Entertainment: How Increasing Media Choice Widens Gaps in Political Knowledge and Turnout,” *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (July 2005), 577-592. Prior’s account modifies the argument by Robert Putnam in *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) that the shift from newspaper reading to television watching reduced civic engagement. From the start, TV may well have promoted the further privatization of leisure time (which had begun with the phonograph and radio) and thereby depressed participation in civic groups. This would agree with the evidence Putnam cites from the research on the introduction of TV in remote Canadian communities (*Bowling Alone*, 235-236). But if Prior is

correct, TV in its early stages had a positive effect on political knowledge and voter turnout, and it was the later proliferation of TV channels that led to the full, long-term effect on civic engagement that Putnam observes.

¹⁵ Yochai Benkler, *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transform Markets and Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).