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CHAPTER 1

The Media in Democratic and Nondemocratic Regimes: A Multilevel Perspective

Anthony Mughan and Richard Gunther

The mass communications media are the connective tissue of democracy. They are the principal means through which citizens and their elected representatives communicate in their reciprocal efforts to inform and influence. Despite the widespread acknowledgment of the paramount importance of this “political communications” function, however, the literature in political science is notable for the general absence of rigorous comparative analyses of the mutually influencing interaction between the flow of political information, on the one hand, and the basic democratic character of political regimes and individual political attitudes and behavior, on the other. As one student of politics and the media has recently bemoaned: “The state of research on media effects is one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science” (Bartels 1993, 267).

An important obstacle to a deeper understanding of the relationship between the media and the democratic political process has long been the lack of an integrated research agenda. Compartmentalization and fragmentation have resulted not only from the scattering of scholars among different academic disciplines (mainly sociology, political science, social psychology, and communications) that rarely interact with one another, but also from a puzzling and seemingly unnecessary bifurcation into distinct schools of analysis. One scholarly approach has been for media analysts to adopt a micro perspective in their focus on the questions of how, and in what ways, the media matter. They have restricted themselves to investigations of the individual-level effects of political communications, usually during election campaigns. Do the media change political attitudes and behavior or do they just reinforce them? Do they differ in their political impact? Are all individuals equally susceptible to media influence? These are among the many micro-level

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foci of analysis in this important school of research.¹ A second and contrasting tendency has been for scholars to be more distinctively macro in focus, studying the structure of media *systems* and how these systems affect politics. Among the systemic characteristics usually examined are patterns of government regulation, of media ownership, of program content, of audience structure, and of viewership. Some scholars have employed this approach in the study of communications media in non-democratic regimes, while others have sought to draw inferences about how the structural characteristics of the media system affect the distribution of political power in democracies, or to bemoan the normative implications of the allegedly “liberal,” “conservative,” or “capitalist” bias of the mainstream media.²

Few published studies, however, have combined these macro and micro perspectives to examine the reciprocal relationship between the media and the politics of democracy and democratization. As a result, our understanding and appreciation of the complexity of this relationship are underdeveloped. This book steps into this void by offering a synthesis of the macro and micro perspectives in ten single-country studies. It explores the relationship between the communications media and democracy from a variety of perspectives and in widely varying political settings. It shares with the majority of published works in this field a concern with the ways in which political communications influence the attitudes and behavior of citizens and affect the quality of political life in established democratic systems. But in developing these themes in the contexts of Britain, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United States, an effort is made to enrich this micro-level perspective by systematically examining macro-level or structural characteristics of these media systems, as well as the interaction between the micro and macro levels.

Other chapters in this volume broaden the traditional geographical and thematic bounds of empirical studies in this field by examining the media's contribution to processes of political change, particularly democratization, in political systems that have been fundamentally transformed over the past decade or two. Studies of Chile, Hungary, Russia, and Spain assess the extent to which government-initiated liberalization of political communications helped to undermine support for authoritarian or posttotalitarian regimes, as well as the contribution of the media to the transition to, and consolidation of, political democracy in these countries. In the case of Italy, we examine the roles of the communications media in a different but no less dramatic kind of political

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change, from one kind of democratic regime to another with decidedly different characteristics. From several perspectives, the scope of this volume is quite broad, and it opens up a series of important questions that have barely been explored comparatively.³

This introductory chapter sets the scene for the change-oriented focus of the individual country studies by reviewing the theoretical background, empirical findings, and evolution of the literature on the media and politics since its initial appearance in the 1940s and 1950s. Familiarity with the early classic studies is important, since they effectively framed popular understanding of the relationships between politics and the media for decades. An overview of more recent research is also desirable, insofar as this information should help the reader to understand the causal mechanisms that underpin processes of political change in the single-country studies that follow.

THE MACRO-LEVEL PERSPECTIVE

THE MEDIA AND REGIME TYPE

Throughout the twentieth century, the mass communications media were central to the dynamics of the relationship between governors and the governed in all types of political regime. Initially because of the spread of literacy and subsequently because of advances in communications technology, the media – and particularly television in today's world – have increasingly become the principal source of political information for the mass public as political discussion within, and information flows through, family, community, and other intermediary organizations have declined in frequency and importance. While the extent to which (and the processes through which) the media actually influence the way in which citizens structure their attitudinal and behavioral orientations towards politics will be discussed later in this chapter (and throughout the remainder of this volume), suffice it to say at this point that political elites widely, if not universally, believe that the media are of paramount importance in shaping these orientations. For this reason, they have been very sensitive to the power of information and have developed media policies to suit their economic, social, and political purposes, although, in practice, government regulation of the mass communications media has varied greatly in both scope and substance. The starkest contrast, in this respect, is rooted in the differing roles of the media in democratic and nondemocratic political systems.

The traditional view has been that the media are schizophrenic in

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character and play contrasting roles in the establishment and maintenance of political order in authoritarian/totalitarian regimes and in democracies: the media have been depicted as manipulative and subversive of individual freedom and political choice in the former and as guarantors of political liberties and government accountability in the latter (Neuman 1991, 22–47; see also Kinder and Sears 1985). Stated more fully, the defining characteristic of the authoritarian/totalitarian model is strict governmental control of the media to achieve objectives set by self-selected, unaccountable political elites and widely promulgated by virtue of their “unconstrained and pervasive power” over their media systems (Neuman 1991, 31). These unaccountable elites are seen not only as setting the policy agenda, but also as carefully structuring the information they convey to the public through their “puppet” media, with the objective of forming and manipulating nonelite attitudes and behaviors. Beyond this similarity, however, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes differ in the nature of the specific goals pursued. According to Juan Linz’s classic typology (1975), authoritarian rulers are primarily concerned with demobilizing and (when necessary) repressing their subject populations with a view to imposing social and political order while maintaining themselves in office. Totalitarians, in contrast, have social-revolutionary objectives. In their efforts to create the “new person” in a radically transformed society, they manipulate the media in an effort to reshape the hearts and minds of nonelites, thereby enforcing the disciplined conformity necessary for mass mobilization in support of a revolutionary ideology and the construction of a utopian society. Such marked divergences in ultimate objectives notwithstanding, however, totalitarian and authoritarian regimes do not differ in their relationship to the mass media (Linz 1974, 1496–7). Both are characterized by strict censorship, repression of journalistic liberty, and heavy-handed efforts to structure highly selective flows of information to the general public.

The political communications process has been portrayed very differently in democratic societies. The media, through the information they convey to the mass public, serve as key guarantors of elite accountability and popular control of government in democracies, since “a broadly and equitably informed citizenry helps assure a democracy that is both responsive and responsible” (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 1). Two characteristics of democratic media systems are held to ensure that political information disseminated by the mass communications media serves to constrain, or check, government power rather than magnify it. The first is that constitutional guarantees or conventions assure citizens

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of free access to political information. Freedom of the press, of speech, and of assembly provide for a wide diversity of political communications and points of view. These freedoms also give citizens the right to take issue publicly with their government and its goals and to remove it from office through free and competitive elections if its actions or inactions are unacceptable to enough of them. The second is that the media are protected from the arbitrary exercise of government power, and media pluralism is institutionalized. Not only are the media free from direct political control but, in addition, legal frameworks are established to promote and sustain a diversity of media forms and outlets. Democracy is strengthened and its integrity ensured by the free flow of information and competition among public and commercial media articulating (often under force of law) a variety of political viewpoints to educate the public and allow it to make informed choices, particularly at election time.

To be sure, this association of democracy with a free press and authoritarianism/totalitarianism with a media enslaved is overdrawn and has never been fully convincing. The media in nondemocratic regimes, for example, never enjoyed the pervasiveness, penetration, or omniscience popularized in George Orwell's *1984* (Pool 1973b; Mickiewicz 1981). In the same vein, the media in democratic societies have never been fully free of government control. In Britain, for example, the government can stop the publication of stories that it unilaterally determines to be prejudicial to national security through a system of so-called D-Notices (May and Rowan 1982). More dramatically still, the broadcast media in France, was actually a state monopoly from the early twentieth century until the 1980s (Palmer and Tunstall 1990). Nonetheless, social scientists' understanding of the relationship between the media and politics has been fundamentally shaped by these sharply divergent ideal types.

To some extent, the simplistic view that the media in nondemocratic regimes were associated with the suppression of popular, accountable government, while contributing importantly to its healthy functioning in democracies, was largely rooted in a Cold War mentality that saw the world divided into the "forces of light" (read democracy) and the "forces of darkness" (read authoritarianism/totalitarianism). Rhetorical overstatement notwithstanding, this dichotomy enjoyed some superficial plausibility and credibility; the media did seem to be associated with the differing political objectives of elites in the two types of regime. As the West rebuilt itself economically and politically after the devastation of

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World War II, democracy seemed to prosper under governments' relatively laissez-faire approach to the media. Indeed, a free and competitive media system was widely credited with playing a key role in the socialization of the post-World War II German and Japanese populations to democratic norms and values (Verba 1965; also see the chapters by Kaase and Krauss in this volume). The totalitarian Soviet Union also seemed to go from strength to strength economically and politically, but it advanced under the aegis of a massive and relentless media campaign mounted to discredit the democratic world and resocialize Soviet citizens into the values of communism, thereby making possible the mobilization of their support behind its ideological goals (Neuman 1991, 22–47). Economic success, regime stability, and the absence of large-scale manifestations of popular discontent all seemed to vindicate the Bolshevik media strategy.

As plausible as this conventional wisdom about the nature of the relationship between the media and political-regime type may have seemed in the postwar years, however, developments in the late 1980s and 1990s posed serious challenges to its validity. The strength of the relationship between rigid state control of the media, on the one hand, and nondemocratic political regimes, on the other, was called into question by what was perhaps the most important and unexpected political change of the late twentieth century – the “global resurgence of democracy” (Diamond and Plattner 1993). The seemingly worldwide retreat of more authoritarian forms of government certainly suggests that state control and manipulation of the media have been notably unsuccessful in sustaining nondemocratic forms of government the world over. Even the “darkest force” of all, the Soviet Union, collapsed and disintegrated into a number of independent states, most of them aspiring to democracy, at least in principle. This implies that the regime's ability to translate its control of the media into compliant and lasting mass-level attitudes and behavioral norms was by no means as great as initially estimated. Indeed, even more damaging to the conventional wisdom about the political role of the media in nondemocratic regimes is that this development took place at the very time when vast technological improvements in the communications media, the deep penetration of regime-controlled information flows into society, and the high level of sophistication of their content implied that such regimes should have become more, not less, able to entrench themselves by enhancing their legitimacy in the eyes of their populations. Why did the opposite transpire? Why were expectations concerning the seemingly limitless antide-

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mocratic potential of media manipulation so totally contradicted by the contagion of worldwide democratization in the 1980s and 1990s?

Similarly, the traditional stereotype of the uniformly positive contribution to democracy by free, unregulated communications has come under increased scrutiny and criticism. In contrast with the traditionally positive image of the media in the established democracies, some journalists and broadcasters in these countries have been charged with undermining representative democracy rather than buttressing and reinforcing it. As we shall see in subsequent essays of this book, this trend is not apparent in all or even most Western democracies (emerging, therefore, as an important but heretofore largely unexplored subject for comparative analysis), but in some prominent cases there has been a growing disillusionment over the extent to which the media present to the electorate an unbiased flow of a plurality of viewpoints, or even an adequate volume of the kinds of information that democratic theory implies should be available to voters. In the United States, for example, it has been argued that journalistic cynicism, coupled with trivialization and personalization of media coverage of politics, has undermined the possibility of the kind of healthy and substantive political debate that democratic government requires. The complaint is increasingly heard that the American media in general, and television in particular, now undermine democracy by equating news with entertainment and deemphasizing coverage of serious, substantive political issues. Instead of broadcasting policy-relevant information to help to create and sustain an informed electorate, the media are accused of devoting undue attention to ephemeral, nonsubstantive matters like current public opinion poll standings and the personalities, character, and foibles of the leading political figures.⁴ Voters are seen as increasingly obliged to reach conclusions and make choices on the basis of criteria that are unrelated to the real business of government. Their choice among competitors for public office is trivialized, and the accountability of public office holders is thereby weakened (Ranney 1983; Bennett 1988; Entman 1989; Iyengar 1991; Patterson 1993; Fallows 1996). “Talk radio” is a good example: rather than facilitating a two-way flow of responsible dialogue between citizens and their elected representatives, it has too often interjected into the public discourse an unprecedentedly venomous stream of malicious, often unsubstantiated rumors and personal insults (Kurtz 1996). As one study put it, “the talk-show culture too often exchanges only the mutual ignorance of listeners and hosts who share mainly a taste for ranting and raving” (Diamond and Silverman 1995, 141). There is

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even evidence of disillusionment with democracy itself, as this type of coverage of politics encourages public cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) and as the negative advertising that is the norm in U.S. election campaigns encourages not citizen participation but the *demobilization* of voters (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995).

To some extent, this wave of pessimism may have emerged in reaction to the largely uncritical assessment of the relationship between the media and democracy that was prevalent in the first few decades of the postwar era. The positive contributions of the media to the development of democratic political cultures in Germany and Japan stood in stark contrast to the tightly controlled media in the repressive regimes of the Soviet bloc. At the micro level as well (as will be seen later in this chapter), early studies seemed to indicate that the impact of the media on political behavior and attitudinal development or change in established democracies was limited and benign. In general, such studies concluded that the media served to educate and inform the electorate, but could not be used to manipulate the attitudes and behaviors of citizens in such a way as to undermine the practice, as well as the principle, of government accountability. In this regard, they were seen as vehicles of communication that perfectly served the purposes of electoral democracy.⁵ With further technological advances, the television medium even came to be regarded by some as heralding a “new dawn,” making possible the transition from representative to participatory democracy (Grossman 1995; Budge 1996).

The current wave of pessimism may turn out to be as transitory as the idealized view of the media and democracy of that earlier era. But what is clear is that it cannot be ignored; a reassessment of the role of mass communications systems in contemporary democracies is long overdue. An explicitly comparative study is particularly timely insofar as numerous cross-national differences are apparent that raise important and interesting questions. Why have the American media, for example, been criticized for excessive cynicism, trivialization, and personalization in their coverage of politics, while such trends are largely absent in other established democracies or, at worst, present only in an incipient form? A reexamination of the media’s political role under nondemocratic regimes is also long overdue, as is assessment of the role played by print and broadcast media in their recent democratization. Were the initial ideal types simply wrong or have changes in media technology, the structure of media systems, or the structures of these societies themselves overtaken the old models and made them irrelevant? These are among

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the many questions that will serve as the foci of analysis in the following chapters.

Our strategy in this volume is to deliberately combine the general and the idiosyncratic in country-by-country examinations of the relationship between democracy and the mass media. The idiosyncratic in each chapter focuses on country-specific considerations like political culture, electoral law, historical legacy, type of social structure and party system, style of executive leadership, and the like. Our more theoretical concern is with the general – with the identification of common media trends making for similar political outcomes, be they in the area of democratic transitions from authoritarianism or in influencing popular attitudes and behaviors in established democracies.

Two important macro-level variables substantially affect the nature of the relationship between the media and the politics of democracy and democratization: the structure of the media system in each country and the pattern of government regulation. As we shall show in the following chapters, these have been configured quite differently in the cases examined in this book, and with important political consequences. And in the last chapter, we will reach a conclusion strikingly at odds with a well-established conventional wisdom: key characteristics of a functioning, healthy democracy are not necessarily enhanced by minimizing government regulation. While we shall defer to the individual country chapters for the presentation of information about the structure of their respective media systems, it is timely at this point to survey the different approaches adopted by democratic governments to the regulation of the communications media.

GOVERNMENT REGULATION OF THE MEDIA

A change of fundamental importance over the last 40 years or so has been the more or less worldwide emergence of television as the preeminent medium of political communication and information. Together with the other broadcast medium, radio, democratic governments treated it differently from the printed press right from the outset. Newspapers and magazines were normally granted virtually unlimited freedom, whereas radio and television were subjected to the close regulation reminiscent of the way authoritarian governments respond to all media.

Respect for, and guarantees of, freedom of the press have long been regarded as among the fundamental tenets of democracy since the unhindered flow of political information was recognized as integral to holding governments accountable for their (in)actions. Accordingly,

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governments were to interfere as little as possible with the free flow of information through the print media. Among the consequences of this hands-off approach was that newspapers could determine their own partisan stance, the level at which they would pitch their appeal, and the style and type of story that would constitute their hallmark. It followed that the audiences for different newspapers tended to vary substantially in their educational levels, political sophistication, and partisan preferences. The result was the emergence of two *de facto* models of print journalism in democratic societies. One, typified by several continental European countries, is characterized by a highly partisan press in which newspapers openly publicize their preferences for their respective parties. In the other, exemplified by most American newspapers in the late twentieth century, newspapers display no obvious partisan preferences in the political coverage that appears in their “national news” sections, even when their editorial pages contain endorsements of specific candidates (Dalton et al. 1998).

With regard to the broadcast media (radio and later television) that began to emerge in the early decades of the twentieth century, by contrast, democratic governments had no choice but to take a more interventionist stance, if only because they were obliged to resolve the problem of wavelength scarcity by awarding broadcast licenses on the basis of criteria they themselves had to formulate. Two modal regulatory philosophies emerged. Typified by the initial responses of the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States, these may be labeled respectively the “public service” and “commercial” models. The principal distinction between them is that public service broadcasting is characterized by an emphasis on news and public affairs, features and documentaries, art, music, and plays, whereas commercial radio and television broadcasting stress general entertainment more heavily (Williams 1974, 78–86). The oversight role of the state is decidedly different in the two models.

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is perhaps the best-known and most influential example of the public service model.⁶ From the birth of radio in the 1920s, British governments (of whatever party) regarded the broadcasting media as a public utility that the state had to control in the public interest. Two especially important benefits were seen in the ability to broadcast nationwide. First was the opportunity to rise above the partiality of newspapers and provide common access to a wide range of public events, ceremonies, and national occasions, thereby bringing all classes of the population together and strengthening na-