
MEDIATED POLITICS: REINVENTING POLITICS IN THE MEDIA AGE

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The political system relates directly to principles of visibility and publicity that remain as main factors in the perception of information. This study engages in an interpretative analysis of the modes of that visibility and publicity that accompany the consolidation of a politics oriented around the sovereignty of the media sphere. In this work, I shall concentrate on three themes that, it is my main argument, have modulated the recent evolution of political journalism: the redefinition of the public sphere, because of the impact of the media; the consolidation of an adversarial image of the press; and the emergence of a paradigm where the political struggle happens in the centre stage of a symbolic battle around the construction of events in the media.

«You don't tell us how to stage the news, and we won't tell you how to cover it», could be read in a plaque on the desk of Larry Speakes, Press secretary of former American president Ronald Reagan (in Smoller, 1990: 97). But this motto was swept away by an intricate process of complicity between journalists and politicians. The former are more and more interested in staging the news to the conveniences of their stories, and the latter procure every way to interfere in the public presentation of their actions.

My opening argument is that political events are, above all, media events. They are prepared to be covered by the media, and tend to adapt easily to routine practices of news organisations. At the same time, news organisations have created formats that easily assimilate the predictable political events into formula plot outlines. This symbiosis produces the field of political journalism.

Political journalism gravitates around two main areas: the area of official action, involving government decisions and attitudes; and the area of political game-schemes, related to situations of «backstage» events and party activities. These two stages of political action interact closely, but the performing scenarios framed for the media separate them. Government decisions and party activities develop in different journalistic patterns, diverging in both language sets and news selection models.

In any case, although different media frames separate them, these levels of political activity are also linked by conceptual journalistic formats. They both belong to the same section pages of newspapers and magazines, and they appear closely related in time during radio and TV newscasts. In many

situations, the sources of information are the same for both levels, or they pertain to similar territories, and the broader political area of intervention connects the issues involved.

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This division, however, is a recent one. It has evolved during the past three decades, with the gradual specialisation of journalistic practices. The emergence of new styles of reporting and the evolution of new patterns of journalistic intervention in some areas created a privileged space for the detachment of a unitary section of news. This was accompanied by the adaptation of the political system to media pressures, and by the flexibility of its institutions. The assimilation of political activity and journalistic intervention in a similar system provided for a simultaneous progression toward an identification of methods and sharing of objectives.

«Political behaviour today is so intertwined with media formats to such an extent that politics is media politics» (Altheide & Snow, 1991: 82). Media and politics sustain each other. Altheide and Snow argues that as the role of the mass media became more powerful than politicians, the latter adapted to the former. So they conclude that organised journalism as we know it is dead (1991: 81).

I cannot agree with Altheide and Snow. My argument is that the recent evolution in this area reveals that what is happening is not the doom of organised journalism. Moreover, politicians are not alone in a course of adaptation. What is in course is a circular process that entails both agents and demands a critical analysis of the traditional concept of political journalism. I agree that it is because of the way in which media logic essentially has redefined political action and rhetoric that we confront the problems of the political spectacle. My theory, however, is that this transformation cannot be imputed solely on the informative system. The responsibility has to be shared by both elements of the political game, because they are shaping its rules together.

This situation, nevertheless, requires trying to understand the role of the media system as an independent institution, separated from the political field. The adversarial role of the press, which has been constituted systematically since the beginning of the 1970s, is evidence of the existing division between these areas. Thus, rigid lines of enhancement of differentiated poles of performance confine the assimilation of methods and objectives.

The claimed image of objectivity encircles that separation of territories, giving political journalism the needed atmosphere to prevail as an independent field of power. Political journalism depends on an image of

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dissociation from official institutions to achieve credibility. In many situations, this separateness leads to the enhancement of an adversarial role image of the press. Nevertheless, this adversarial role, if taken too far, could discredit the institutions and values on which it depends for credibility. «If officials and their position were routinely attacked or held suspect by journalists, the media would have no source of 'official acknowledgements'» (Bennet, 1988: 124). However, it is equally true the media would risk its independence if reporters openly catered to the propaganda interests of public officials.

From this perspective, the complicity becomes a conflict of interests. And this conflict, or adversarial relationship, is a ritual. The ritualistic elements emerge in the journalistic coverage of routine events, or at the level of the most complex news investigation. It creates an image of no-holds-barred reporting while outlining actual news content.

Still, the adversarial role of the press has some constraints inflicted by the ritualistic condition of the relation between the media and the political systems. For one thing, the aggressive attitude of the press is against politicians individually and leaves relatively untouched the institutions they represent. This creates a dramatic image of journalistic aggression, but discloses a subtle image of institutional deference.

In fact, the mental picture that comes out of the relationship between journalists and politicians is one of antagonism. The ritualistic conflict is well represented by the stage settings of the televised interviews with politicians, where the parts are placed in confrontational poses. At the same time, we see frequently politicians accuse the press of bias and of hostile attitudes towards them. Politicians complain, among other things, that the political journalism practised in the various media has a perverse consequence: it benefits those sources who leak confidential information, and those who confirm mere rumours that are presented as facts (Pereira, 1996). Those politicians argue that it is so because those are useful elements to journalists in conferring legitimisation to the ideas argued in their news analysis.

At another level, there is the problem of government secrecy as an obstacle to political reporting. This phenomenon has aggravated in the past decades, but it is now a given fact in almost every political system, even in democratic societies. There are various examples of how business and government elites operate to support each other's secrecy (cf. Downing, 1985: 166).

All these elements set up the ritualistic image of adversarial press, «limited by the mutual acknowledgement of each side's political legitimacy» (Bennet, 1988: 126). Still, that image is the very symbol of the credibility of news¹. People would not believe in a media system that did not denounce the errors of the political system. Noam Chomsky (1989) uses this argument to prove that the media construct an image in which they appear as adversaries of the power structure, when in reality they favour that structure with a set of misconceptions about reality.

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This adversarial posture of the press is influenced by several internal factors developed during the action of dealing with political institutions. As Thomas Patterson mentions, «the poisonous effect of Vietnam and Watergate on the relationship between journalists and politicians has not dissipated» (1993: 19). This analyst concludes that the «anti-politics» bias of the press that came out of the closet two decades ago persists, cultivating the adversary culture. During the early 1970s, in the U.S., the White House reporter had become a «kind of gladiator», the «proxy opposition» who linked the issues of the moment to the man responsible for doing something about them (Smith, 1980: 174).

However, Michael Parenti argues, in a position similar to that of Noam Chomsky, that this adversarial role is limited by the rules of the media game: «The top news executives are subject to the judgements of the ruling corporate directors and owners who exercise financial power over the organization» (1986: 34). This idea reinforces the thesis of a simulated antagonist posture of the journalistic system. Even if there is evidence of that antagonism being expressed in the content of news stories.

Whatever the purposes behind this “bad news” coverage of politics, it needs facts to corroborate its statements. The situation poses the problem of considering a political statement as a fact, even if the statement argues a false proposition. If a politician claims a fact the journalist cannot verify but assumes as newsworthy, the fact may well be untrue but still is reported by the media as a fact. The responsibility of the statement belongs to the politician who affirmed it, but there is a moral (and in some countries a legal one, as well) responsibility of the press towards that statement.

The difficulty of the problem is that it imposes a complex process of relocating facticity. Because, if the fact is unverifiable (for several reasons), the solution used by journalists is to confront another source with that information, that may confirm or deny it. «Like doctors who offer a service by telling patients the probable success of different medical options,

¹ And «credibility in the minds of the audience in the sine qua non of news» (Glasgow Media Group: 1976: 7).

reporters absolve themselves of responsibility by structuring the alternatives» (Tuchman, 1978: 91).

As a last resource, reporters use credited sources who may be quoted as giving truth-claims, transforming the quotation as a device planned to distance the reporter from phenomena identified as facts. This construction of political facts, based on statements and arguments of different sources, puts journalists in the role of intermediary agents, rather than adversary elements. However, as it is argued here, journalists have more than an observation standing point. They are active elements in the process.

Simply because the press and public officials strike a careful balance between surface and underlying value consensus does not mean there is active collusion at work. As with most rituals, news reporting requires genuine involvement of actors in their roles. Both public officials and journalists are personally involved in the conflict over the presentation of daily news information. Both sides have enough to gain and lose on a personal level to make the displays of aggression genuine (Bennett, 1988: 127).

The image of conflict between press and politicians is limited further by the mutual acknowledgement of each side's legitimacy. A stable symbiotic relationship emerges from the ritualistic confrontation, in which opposition seems genuine. I am not trying to imply there is no adversarial role of the press. My argument is that this opposition scheme contributes to the interests of both politicians and journalists, obviously at different levels and with different intensities. In this role, journalists are more competent to produce attractive information, and they assume an image of attentive «watchdogs» of the political system. The fact ascribes credibility to the media system, which is essential for politicians, who share the territory of journalistic information.

I shall now try to explain why the media agenda is redefining the concept of public sphere, by affecting its central nervous system - political power. The synergies between journalists and political advisors, although they stand in opposite fields and pursue different objectives, have complicated the traditional scenario of politics.

The relation between the media and politics has been reordered by the inversion of the formula of «political centrality of mass communications», substituted by the formula of «communication centrality of the political activity» (Grossi, 1985: 147).

The public sphere is affected in its nucleus by the dynamics of systemic reformations². Politics is structured by communication processes that involve all the actors of its play in a script that is ever changing. These modifications take place in the very centre of the public space, where, according to Jurgen Habermas (1971; 1974), politics becomes separated from citizens and the expert is separated from audiences.

114 The redefinition of this public sphere creates what French journalist and professor of communication François-Henri de Virieu calls the mediacracy (1990). A conceptual space where everything occurs inside media schemes. In Virieu's mediacracy, sports is not in stadiums, money is not in banks, religion is not in churches, justice is not in courts, politics is not in parliaments. All now happens in the media. But in this new system, the individuals remain sovereign. Not because of their vote. But because of their opinion.

In this new scheme, political information is not meaningfully accessible, even in what is labelled as an information society. «Knowledge, therefore, is both simultaneously present and absent in such a society» (Eldridge, 1993: 18). The subversion of the communicative formula, proposed by Grossi, alters the conditions of public knowledge of the public sphere. The interference of the media in that process is no longer a role of intermediate. It is an active role of participation, as a confident partner.

The political [element] assists thus to an outside development, not only of the social complexity, but also of the information society: aggregation, representation, decision, government, become incomprehensible not only without channels of communication, but also without general informative strategies and options of real communicative politics (Grossi, 1985: 147).

The redefinition of the parts, it is my point, is being conducted by the media system, with the complicity of the political system, in an elaborate dialectic process of seduction: «Instead of the confrontation of arguments, the media scheme sets procedures of seduction» (Rodrigues, 1995: 20). In front of this, many authors claim the «death of politics» by the consequent aesthetic individualisation of the political experience (cf. Wolton, 1995). Others, however, see in this phenomenon the creation of alternative ways of redefining the public space (McNair, 1995).

From my perspective, there are parallel routes of evolution between political communication and political journalism. Both concepts intercept each other at the exact point of subordination to the immediacy of «political events».

² About these reformations in the public sphere, see Dader, 1992.

Thus, the media agenda and the political agenda are organised in function of the public agenda³. These mechanisms of communication feed the information system with new events and new developments to previous events. Régis Debray talks about a real «medialogic revolution» to register that the persisting time of each political event lasts for only a couple of days (1993: 30).

Political communication has been defined as «rhetoric plus electricity»⁴. In fact, there is a sense of persuasion living at the heart of a process where a set of techniques (involved in technologies of communication) performed by political agents try to influence the attitudes and decisions of individuals or groups of individuals.

In this sense, political communication comes into sight as an extension of political marketing, based on the interaction of media, publicity, and polls (cf. Beniger & Jones, 1990; Broh, 1980; Gerstlé, 1992; Kraus & Davis, 1980). It comprises not only the formats of expression divulged by political institutions, but also those conveyed by news stories.

This broad definition of political communication proposes the existence of a system with an internal coherence and where its elements interact with one another in an open circuit. Political institutions, the media, and their audiences form a complex structure of power, relying on the persistence of their mutual relationships.

The journalistic system gains an important status in these game-schemes. By its capacity to influence attitudes and opinions, the media perceive some institutions as more important than others. Then, they perpetuate that perception by locating themselves within or near these institutions (Dreier, 1982). According to this process, some political institutions are considered especially newsworthy and become natural sources of information for the media.

That is why political journalism has to be examined as an integral part of the political system. Political journalism is embedded in this system and its practices define, in various cases, the agenda of its institutions (Garnham, 1979; 1985). Seymour-Ure argues that, without the media, «political activity in its contemporary forms could hardly carry on at all» (1974: 62).

3 Free translation.

4 Some authors, like Mário Mesquita, argue that the political agenda is constructed around the Erik Neveu says this expression circulates among French media people, satirising Lenin's definition of communism as «soviets plus electricity» (1992:165)

The public space in which political journalism acts is the privileged stage for the play of three agents in the political game: the news promoters, the news assemblers, and the news consumers. In different levels, they produce the various scene plots of a process that integrates the political activity in the public agenda, and vice-versa.

116 The major changes occurring in this territory have a direct impact on the concept of public space. In Jurgen Habermas's perspective (1989), the public sphere was contaminated, through the media, by the logic of private interests, and was subjected to manipulation. In his perspective, the critical attribute of that sphere has disappeared and a demonstrative element captured its place, subjugated by the ubiquitous power of the media.

There is an inscribed inclination in journalism that points to a blooming model of construction of political events (cf. Achache, 1990). This is fruit of the complex game-schemes played by the interconnected agents of the political arena, and where the journalist is taking on an increasing responsibility. Some authors refer to this space as the «electronic agora», or the territory where contradictory speeches are confronted as a model of evolutionary conflict (Achache, 1990; Katz, 1992; Mesquita, 1995).

The predisposition to perceive ideas in complete images (cf. Kohler, 1947) dramatises situations, affecting the content of media messages. Take this example: the use of divulging statistics on partial or provisory results of voting, in political elections, dramatises the informative content. But it also confuses it.

Michael Parenti refuses to accept the idea that the media system is responsible for the stereotyping and reductionism of the information provided (1986: 7). He argues the news media do not fail to do their job, rather they perform it all too well. Because, «their objective is not to produce an alert, critical, and informed citizenry but the kind of people who will accept an opinion universe dominated by corporate and governmental elites, almost all of whom share the same ideological perspectives about political and economic reality» (1986: 8).

Schiller (1986) sees in all of this an «epochal change in news». The essential benefits of hard information continue to be gained. However, he argues, the citizenry «is being buried in an avalanche of misinformation, as it encounters cruel new hybrids of news, advertising and entertainment, with a hefty dash of government manipulation thrown in» (1986: 35).

Robert Entman (1989) agrees with this vision and states that, despite any improvement in access to news, people do not know more about politics

now than they did 20 years ago. He also advocates the media are ineffective in providing news that holds government to timely and consistent account, despite the trend toward increasingly sceptical reporting.

Discourse is a major factor of mutation in political communication. This process of transformation acts on the control political agents have on audiences. Petrogani (1980) argues that this control is effected through the manipulation of images in the media discourse.

The dramatisation of political scenarios sets up stages prepared for new protagonists, dependent on one another but self-sufficient in their autonomy towards the traditional political cycles (Balandier, 1993: 110). The audience of this play can only appeal to the protection of the saturation of images and information provided by the intense media processes (Cf. Cahné, 1990).

The range of formats of political communication actions has expanded with the emergence of television and, more recently, with new platforms for televised information: debates and discussion programmes, political satire shows, phone-ins, chat shows, documentaries, plays, and stories on political themesⁱⁱ. At the same time, the distinction between 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' television has been blurred by the presentation of fictional accounts of events, or by the growing tendency to «docudramas» (Carpini & Williams, 1994; Fiske, 1987). The impact of television on politics has to be seen as a dynamic relation where both elements adjust to new situations.

The dimension of spectacle needs the dramatisation provided by the new political communication system. The mechanisms of political enunciation relate to the mental representations of politics. And the language of information affects these schemes of presenting political reality. The metaphor and metonym are not just word-gamesⁱⁱⁱ. They have a cognitive dimension. According to Lakoff and Johnson, «metaphors are possible in language precisely because there are metaphors in the conceptual system of the individual» (1983: 16). Thus, the journalistic metaphor used in the journalistic presentation of politics allows a new dramatisation of political events. Actions and interpretations hinge upon the situation in which they begin, including the language that depicts a social situation. The language that interprets objects and actions also constitutes a discourse. «Political leaders, like other subjects, act and speak as reflections of the situations they serially confront» (Edelman, 1988: 9). There is a functional absorption of the political speech by the media speech, and vice-versa.

This assimilation of discourses, it is my argument, will have a tremendous impact in Habermas's theory of subversion of the concept of publicity

(Habermas, 1989). The intrusion of the media in the political system affects and transforms the idea of public space. The new frame of the public space insinuates a new concept of journalism as a form of public discourse. In this context, Jurgen Habermas enunciated that public opinion was just a fiction of constitutional law (1989). In the same way, statistics used by the media, such as polls, are a strategy to legitimate information (Wolton, 1995: 181). By reinforcing the power of representative information, the media put the heat on their own position in the system. They perform, thus, a kind of isomorphism between the representative logic, inherent to politics, and the increasing representative logic of information.

The representative logic of interpretation has the advantage of unifying the various presentations of reality, but has the inconvenience of applying a common code to phenomena of different nature. The evolution toward more analytical linguistic patterns in journalism, and the evolution toward forms of precision journalism, where statistics dominate the discourse, produce a continuity between the vision provided by the media system and that of the political system.⁵

This paradox of communication, which developing role is connected directly with the expansion of the political field, consists in favouring the idea of a reduction of antagonisms. The media emerge, thus, as mediators of conflictive interests.

The impact of television on the media system contributed to what analysts call the hegemony of image in the political arena. Photo-ops are more important than headlines (cf. Santos, 1995). The world is being transformed by mediated images of reality - the pseudo-events - in a process where the culture of simulacra is taking over the traditional role of practical experience. This is the civilisation of image (Calvino, 1988). This is the «telecracy» or the televised democracy (Katz and Dayan, 1992). This is the mediacracy (Virieu, 1990).

Television translates problems into images and leaves the individual face-to-face with a logic of representation dominated by simulacra of political decisions (Atkinson, 1984). The analytical process involving media discourse does not exclude political discussion. Instead, it saturates it with speech-schemes that concentrate audience attention on visual patterns whose meaning assimilates the entirety of political values in communicational values.

The problem consists in knowing whether individuals can translate images into problems (Sartori, 1993: 326). The translation implies an ideological

⁵ See Glass & Ettema (1993)

perspective of the simulacrum in politics, where representation is something previously represented as framed.

In the beginning of the 1960s, Kenneth Boulding argued that «behaviour depends on the image» (1961: 6), as he studied the way messages change images. Social construction of reality is a result of a process of image formation, stimulated by messages transmitted by media networks. In this process, political behaviour is a response to political images. All of this is happening in a circular space, where political reality is defined by political messages, which in turn alter political images, resulting in intense transformations of political behaviour.

Communication reality overtakes political reality. The media create a communication reality by shaping the conceptual environment in which individuals communicate (Thayer, 1968). Thus, political reality is formed by media reports. These are talked about, altered, and interpreted by individuals. The transformation in the media system occurring in the last two decades accentuates this format of internal processes. Inside these modifications, it is difficult to separate the analysis of media effects on the political sphere from the effects of the media pressures on public opinion (Dayan & Katz, 1981; 1992).

Television accelerated the whole process. The «tele-events» reconfigure the role of the media in a dialectic process involving the political communication arena (Dayan & Katz, 1992). However, this is not a linear circuit of perfect identifications: «What the politician wishes to say is not necessarily what the media report him or her as having said» (McNair, 1995: 45). The media report on political activity, but they are also part of it, available as a resource to the political communication actors.

Journalists are an essential part of the political process: «Journalists and their news organisations are key players in hegemonic processes. They do not simply report events, but participate in them and act as protagonists» (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991:47). The media provide the social structure with an outlet for the statement of shared values. In the new public sphere, journalists interpret reality, shaping the traces of its transformations.

The problem, for politicians, is that there is an interpretative assertion in presenting reality through the media that has an impact on the public agenda. Therefore, any transformation in the process of political journalism has consequences in the modes of perception of political reality.

This idea confirms the hypothesis asserted by McCombs (1970) who argued that the «agenda-setting» theory only worked with some issues and

under restricted conditions. One of these factors is what researchers call the «need for orientation», meaning that the agenda-setting causes a greater influence on individuals with a high necessity for information on a particular issue. Iyengar and Kinder refer to this factor, saying the journalistic agenda (especially in television) is particularly important to the individuals with limited political knowledge (1987: 60). They state that the more the individuals are away from the world of events, the stronger is the power of the TV newscasts agenda-setting (1987: 60).

Modern theories argue that the triviality of politics and the expulsion of rational discourse from the political system generate exchanges of empty signifiers and meaningless messages across barren landscapes (McNair, 1995: 42). Doris Graber notes that «people throughout the world of politics consider the media importance and behave accordingly» (1984: 19). In this interactive process, the media are critical to both the public attitude formation and to the political system. Or, as Baudrillard puts it, we will never know if an advertisement or opinion poll has had a real influence on individual or collective will, but we will never know either what would have happened if there had been no opinion poll or advertisement (1988: 210).

At another level, the «hyperpersonalisation» of political life assigns this process a new dimension of contact with journalistic messages. The «close-up» camera focus is a privileged figure of «tele-politics». The mechanisms of distancing, typical of the exercise of power in legitimated political systems, was substituted by a scheme based on the «psychologisation» of political life (Romanet, 1992). That is one of the reasons why W. Bennett refers to the world of personalised politics as a «fantasy world» (1988: 34), where the absence of attention to power structures encourages the audience to abandon political analysis in favour of casting their political fates with the hero of the moment.

The mechanisms of identification with the political leaders' figures prevail over the tentative of argumentative rationalisation. But, at the same time, the privileges of the words of political leaders lose ground to the analytical interpretation of the journalist. The interpretation of reality by the media system kills the rational argumentation of politicians, replacing it with the rational argumentation of the political communication process as a whole.

Politics can no longer escape the media. Therefore, there is a process of adaptation that brings closer journalists and politicians in a game scheme that is redefining journalism and politics.

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