

The Hidden Media Powers That Undermine Democracy

Written by John Keane

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JOHN KEANE, SEP 5 2011

When recently ploughing through Tony Blair's autobiography, I hit a rare rock of truth. On the last night of the second millennium, when the government's extravaganza spectacles were faring badly, Blair recalls with special horror his discovery that a pack of top journalists invited to attend the midnight Millennium Dome celebrations had been left stranded at a London underground station clogged with New Year's Eve revellers.

Blair tells how he grabbed the lapels of the minister in charge, his old friend and flatmate Lord "Charlie" Falconer. "Please, please, dear God", says Blair, "please tell me you didn't have the media coming here by tube from Stratford just like ordinary members of the public". Lord Falconer replies: "Well, we thought it would be more democratic that way." Blair responds: "Democratic? What fool thought that? They're the media, for Christ's sake. They write about the people, they don't want to be treated like them." Falconer: "Well, what did you want us to do, get them all a stretch limo?" Thundered Blair: "Yes, Charlie, with the boy or girl of their choice and as much champagne as they can drink."

Trickery and charm

In recent months, thanks to Nick Davies and other brave journalists in hot pursuit of the hidden secrets of Rupert Murdoch's empire, we've learned more about efforts by key media players and top politicians like the British Prime Minister David Cameron to trick and charm the pants off each other.

The Murdoch scandal has revealed more than a few fragments of a world not normally covered by journalists, or seen with naked public eyes: a world that's potentially dangerous for democracy called mediocracy. The pun's more than just a pun. It refers to the tangled webs of back-channel contacts and hidden power relations connecting senior politicians and top journalists, helped along by public relations agencies, lobbyists and other figures of public contrivance.

Although there is little clear-headed analysis of its shadowy contours, mediocracy has been gaining ground for some time in virtually all democracies. In Cameron's Britain and Obama's United States, just as in Gillard's Australia and Berlusconi's Italy, undercover skills of media management and heavily manipulated, aggressively sensationalist and fast-changing publicity cycles in politics have become routine.

How did mediocracy happen?

We could say that all popularly elected governments are today proactively engaged in clever, cunning struggles to kidnap their clients and citizens mentally through the manipulation of appearances, with the help of accredited journalists and other public relations curators. The age of organised political contrivance is upon us. How and why has this happened?

Conspiracy theories are unhelpful. Functionalist explanations are closer to the mark. Put bluntly, mediocracy is a democratic phenomenon. After all, within any given representative democracy politicians, professional journalists and citizens depend upon each other. Audiences of citizens need journalists to get close to politicians and governing officials so that they can check their words against their deeds, to probe whether or not they are bullshitting, to help

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judge their competence as leaders. For reasons of reputation and career advancement, journalists also need direct access to politicians and governments. Scoops, breaking news and lead stories are a must in the curriculum vitae of every established or upwardly mobile journalist.

But journalists need politicians and governing officials for other reasons, including the raw material that is constantly needed to fill space and programming holes. The tactic of making constant “announcements” (as Lindsay Tanner has pointed out) becomes something of a governing imperative, a method that is usually much-welcomed by news-hungry journalists because it fills voids, plugs gaps, provides copy that generates public attention.

The dalliance

From the other side of the divide, politicians need journalists to get their messages across to citizens. Journalists are vital translators and communicators of their words and deeds to audiences of citizens. They attract and hold the attention of busy people, helping them to understand what politicians are saying and doing. They can of course do politicians a big favour by helping convince citizens that their representatives are doing an excellent job, sometimes (as during political honeymoon periods) by singing lullabies to citizens who, for a time, politically sleepwalk their way through daily life.

Or journalists can function as early warning detectors, even as triggers of political scandals with the power to unseat individual representatives, or to bring whole governments crashing to the ground. That’s the theory of journalism and democracy, seen from a functionalist perspective.

In practice, the dalliance of journalists and high-level politics is always contingent. Synergy and symbiosis are not their “natural” fate. Hard work and constant “informal” priming from both sides is required. Journalists and politicians drink and dine together. They bump into each other at gatherings, in shopping malls, airports and school grounds, and at formal functions. They frisk and frolic and keep in touch; sometimes they share beds. Their working habits coincide. They think about similar things and talk to the same people, often in tight circles of friends, sources, advisors, colleagues and former colleagues. And journalists and politicians do inside baseball (as Americans say) with an often bizarre assortment of inside players.

Finding favour

There are companies such as Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, the leading political consultancy firm in the world with major clients on its list that include Coca-Cola, Verizon, Tony Blair and the ALP. There are public relations agents, many of whom are ex-journalists, armed with promises of planting “positive” stories on behalf of their clients, or shielding them from “negative” coverage.

Not to be overlooked are large lobby firms such as Hill and Knowlton, the Duberstein Group and Patton Boggs; and there are think tanks, whose PR role normally far outweighs any independent thinking that supposedly happens inside their office walls. Helped along by such players, accredited journalists and politicians, when unacquainted, make beelines for each other, in search of mutual favours, usually under the cover of discretion and silence. Sweetheart deals are struck. Press releases are exchanged, digested, recycled. Dissenting voices are ex-communicated, pushed out through the revolving doors. Misfits are advised of the penalties, such as social and professional ostracism, for wandering too far off message, from the cosy fold.

This is the point where mediocracy takes root. For that to happen, institutional regulations, or their absence, are always required. Their shaping powers are vital in making or breaking a mediocracy.

Shaping the message

The White House Press Corps in the United States and the Westminster “lobby” in the United Kingdom are exemplars of these shaping institutions. The Canberra Press Gallery and the Australian Press Council, the 22-member self-regulatory representative body of print media, are local versions of the same arrangements, whose

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effect is to stand guard over the revolving doors and closed circuits of information that connect journalism and high-level politics.

Sometimes the dalliance results in iron-clad oligarchy, as in the Japanese system of press clubs (*kisha kurabu*), an 800-strong countrywide network of journalists who as members of their exclusive clubs enjoy privileged access not just to politicians but also to government ministries, political parties, businesses, the Tokyo Stock Exchange and even the imperial household.

The *kisha* system reminds us of another compelling reason why mediocrity flourishes: its beneficiaries quickly sense that they have an interest in preserving their own privileges, hence they do everything to hang on to their power, even if that means sacrificing personal integrity, investigative reporting and other conventional standards of high-quality journalism. When that dynamic sets in, journalists undermine their own authority. Publics disbelieve them; journalists are judged to be dissemblers, careless confabulators and liars.

Mediocrity's impact on democracy

Politicians suffer a similar fate, which prompts in turn a fundamental political question: on balance, all things considered, why exactly is mediocrity, seemingly a democratic phenomenon, bad for democracy? The worrying thing is that answers to this question are weighed down by worn-out clichés. While everybody agrees that the contours of today's democracies are heavily mediated and manipulated by newspapers, radio, television and the internet, critics of mediocrity, Jay Rosen for instance, typically fall back on such stock phrases as the "informed citizen" and calls for a new politics and journalism based on "reality" and "facts".

If only things were so simple. Correspondence theories of truth and "reality" were long ago discredited philosophically; any thinking person knows that "truth" has many faces, as Kafka said. The problem with mediocrity is not that it suppresses "true" pictures of "reality" that should otherwise be plain for all to see; it is that mediocrity hinders the circulation of other, different, equally plausible pictures of reality that are so vital for making meaningful judgements about the great complexity of the world around us.

The elitist ideal of the informed citizen

As for Rousseau-esque appeals to engaged citizens whose heads are stuffed with unlimited quantities of "information" about a "reality" that they're on top of: that's an utterly implausible and – yes – anti-democratic ideal which dates from the late nineteenth century. Favoured originally by those who stood for a restricted educated franchise and who rejected partisan politics grounded in the vagaries and injustices of everyday social life, the ideal of the "informed citizen" was elitist. It still is.

In the age of monitory democracy, appeals to "reality journalism" and the "informed citizen" are both outdated and too timid. What's needed, for the sake of democracy against mediocrity, are new arguments for open systems of communication and the free flow of different points of view.

Producing mediocrity

So here, in conclusion, is one possibility: the reason why mediocrity is bad for democracy is that it stifles what ancient Greek democrats called bold, courageous speech (*parrhēsia*) aimed at the powerful. But what's so good about fearless "wild thinking" and untamed conjectures that are unwedded to slavish talk of "reality" and "truth", we can ask?

There's one possible answer: in matters of public life and politics, fearless sense-making reports about the world are the best weapon we have for countering the risks and dangers of folly and arrogance, bossing and bullying. From the point of view of courageous journalism, mediocrity is meekness and mediocrity. In matters of government, it is malfeasance and malefaction.

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Wise citizens

Democracy is by contrast an unending experiment in taming hazardous concentrations of power. It needs wise citizens: experienced citizens who know they don't know everything, and who suspect those who think they do, especially when they try to camouflage their arrogant will to power over others. Here's the rub: the whole prickly issue of journalists and governments as bedfellows is vitally important for democracies simply because know-alls who wield power normally protect their flanks by means of deception.

That's why their chastening through continuous public scrutiny is imperative. And why, where it exists, mediocracy must be broken up, initially through public enquiries unafraid of tackling tough questions, such as whether bodies such as press councils should include a popularly elected component as well as representatives of new, independent media platforms, who themselves deserve public funding.

By enabling the production of communication with spine, democracy is a way of humbling the powerful, rendering them publicly accountable to citizens and their representatives, sometimes by forcing them to own up, or even to step down. If this sounds implausible, perhaps we should ask for the opinions of the individuals who lost everything to Bernard Madoff, or those who were hacked by Murdoch's journalists. Or the citizens of Tokyo forced recently to stock up on facemasks, potassium iodide tablets and Geiger counters. Or the Iraqis, Libyans and Palestinians whose lives have been damaged by war. And our own indigenous people.

What might all these good citizens, in their own different voices, say about mediocracy and its fickle effects?

John Keane is Director of the newly-founded Sydney Democracy Initiative and Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney. His most recent book, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009), was short-listed for the 2010 Non-Fiction Prime Minister's Literary Award. This article was originally published on *The Conversation*.