

Book Review: Katrin Voltmer, ed., *Mass Media and Political Communication in New Democracies* (London: Routledge/ECPR Studies in European Political Science, 2006), 262 pages.

## **The Role of the Media and Political Communication after Democratic Transition**

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The collection of articles in this volume makes an important contribution to our understanding of the role of the media and political communication in new democracies. This is a welcome addition to the field, as the comparative political communications literature tends to focus on developments in Western Europe and the United States. The chapters address cases in the main geographical regions that featured in what Samuel Huntington describes as the “Third Wave of Democratization,” namely Eastern and Southern Europe, East Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Although all the cases can be categorized as “New Democracies,” there is a good variation in their relative degree of democratic consolidation, ranging from cases such as Spain, which are regarded as consolidated democracies, to states such as Russia or Ukraine that retain many of the communist regime’s authoritarian practices in dealing with the media and actually have been categorized by Freedom House as “Not Free” or “Partly Free.”

In the introductory chapter, Katrin Voltmer challenges the common contention in the democratization literature that views media change after transition as a dependent variable of political and market forces. Instead, she argues that the media is also “actively taking part in the process of democratization by shaping the orientations and actions of other participants” (p. 6). In other words, “the book is based on a model that conceptualizes political communication as a system of dynamic interaction between political actors, the media and audience members, each of whom is involved in producing, receiving and interpreting political messages” ( p. 6).

The volume is then divided into three core parts. The first examines the mass media and journalistic practices. This is followed by a section on the communication strategies of parties and governments, while the third looks at

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audience responses to political messages.

Of the five chapters in part one, the first by Carlos Barrera and Ricardo Zugasti examines the role of the Spanish press in the critical post-transition period that followed the death of the dictator, Franco. The authors reveal the media's potential positive contribution to democratization. It is argued that, in this period, there was a journalistic-government consensus in which both parties promoted democratic values and the new political system. The next two chapters look at the relationship between the media and the government after the fall of authoritarian rule in Russia and South Africa, respectively. The Hedwig De Smaele article on Russia reveals a sometimes paradoxical relationship between press freedom and democracy, in which restrictions on press freedom are often justified on grounds of protecting democracy. While Russia is widely viewed as a case of democratic stagnation or even reversal, South Africa has the reputation as the success story of African democratic transition. Nevertheless, Herman Wasserman and Arnold De Beer outline the tensions or conflicts of interests between the post-Apartheid government and the (mainly white) media. The contribution by Silvio Waisbord takes a cross-national approach to examine the relationship between the media and its audience in Latin America. The reader is reminded that democratic consolidation is not inevitably a smooth linear process, for since transition there actually has been a decline in public trust in journalism. Similarly, rather than the dominance of the impartial, balanced American model of journalism, such practices co-exist with the persistence of highly partisan journalism. In the final chapter in part one, Natalya Krasnoboka and Kees Brants reveal how, over a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, there is still a strong authoritarian legacy in the realm of the media in Ukraine. At the time of writing, the mainstream media remained dominated by the ruling party, with highly biased and partisan election news coverage the order of the day. However, a more pluralistic picture is found in the new media sources such as online newspapers. While the traditional mass media remain under the thumb of the government, the Internet papers can play a role in democratization by offering alternative political perspectives and relatively impartial reporting.

The chapters in part two examine how political actors communicate with citizens, particularly during election campaigns. Gary Rawnsley's piece on Taiwan and Roberto Espindola's chapter on Latin America show, even where modern campaigning methods are introduced, traditional grass-roots communication is equally if not more crucial for electoral success. Quite a different picture is found in the chapter on Russia by Sarah Oates, which shows how media control rather than party organization is the key mechanism in vote mobilization. The final chapter in this section by Lee Ming-ying explores the development of e-government in Taiwan. Technically, Taiwan's e-government system is among the most advanced in the world; however, as Lee argues, this capacity has thus far had little role in the island's democratic consolidation due to the missing link, the lack of interactive communication.

The chapters in the third section turn their attention to the way that the audience, the citizens of the new democracies, receives political messages. The first two articles, which focus on audience responses in Russia, reveal the power and limitations of the media effects. For instance, the Stephen White and Ian McAlister piece shows that control of the state media in post-communist Russia is a powerful tool in election campaigns. Media exposure does appear to have a positive impact on the voting choices of supporters of Kremlin-supported parties. The final empirical chapter in this section examines cross-national data on the issue of whether the media fosters or undermines democratic values. After the patterns of media manipulation in Russia described in the previous chapter, the data outlined by Voltmer and Rudiger Schmitt-Beck is more promising for the role of the media in democratic development. They argue that, in the cases they examine, the media serves not only to enhance political knowledge and participation but also to promote positive attitudes toward political parties and democracy.

In addition to examining political communication in geographical areas that have been neglected in the literature, this collection also should be commended for the use of much new and previously unpublished primary data. Generally, the quality of writing in the various chapters is quite high. The political context of the cases is well explained, making them accessible to readers unfamiliar with these regions. The authors also do a fine job of placing their empirical work within the political communication literature.

The main drawback of the volumes lies in the lack of a real unifying framework. Instead, it is a collection of fine but only loosely related conference papers on the media in new democracies. The volume would have benefited if the authors had designed their research to fit an overarching framework.

Nevertheless, Voltmer has succeeded in assembling a unique and valuable collection of research on political communication in “Third Wave” democracies. The articles reveal the critical role that the media can play in the quality of democracy after democratic transition. However, there is clearly great variation in the capacity of the media to promote the kind of political debate that will foster the consolidation of democracy.

