

# Assesing media effects: The pitfall of technological determinism

A special case: media effects on political culture

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## 1 Introduction

In modern democratic regimes, access to political power depends on the capacity to mobilize the will of electors. That is the fundamental rule of democracy.

Simultaneously, in our modern societies, the electing citizens tend to receive most of the relevant information for their political decisions through the media. Political information is gathered, filtered, processed and interpreted by the media. The political game – it is commonly believed – is restricted to the media arena. In the words of Manuel Castells, "outside the media there's only political marginality"(Castells, 1997).

It is therefore understandable that the analysis of media (and of television in particular) effects on political behavior became a matter of major concern both for social scientists as for political agents. The question is to know how do media affect the functioning of the democratic process. Do they strengthen or undermine the democratic process? Do they favor liberalism or populism? Do they empower the citizens or the ruling elite?

The question, which never ceased to grow in importance since the Second World War and the advent of the television revolution, recently gained a new relevance with the growing importance of the so-called new media whose interactive capabilities seem to offer new and revolutionary possibilities. Ross Perot in particular, contributed to the resurgence of this debate, with his ill-defined but innovative notion of electronic town halls and government by plebiscites.

In this work, we will review some of the major perspectives on the role of both mass media and new media in the political process. And we will realize that, for most

analysts, their influences point in opposite directions. Whereas mass media technical characteristics point in the direction of the undermining of Democracy, the new media capabilities promise pluralism and a revitalized Democracy. We will then revisit Russell Neuman's (1991) alternative approach to the assessment of new media effects on political culture (the model of forces in tension). Although we will focus our discussion in a particular area of media effects studies, we believe that Neuman's methodical approach to this problem is helpful in a broader context. With this possible generalization in mind, we will therefore briefly examine, in one final point, his underlying strategy of analysis and his notions of monist and balanced theories of media effects.

## **2 Mass media vs. New Media. Contrasting effects on political culture**

CBS's 1938 radio broadcast of an adapted version of H.G. Wells's *The war of the worlds* constituted the first and one of the most dramatic demonstrations of the persuasive power of mass media. But it was the powerful imagery of Orwell's 1984 modeled after Lenin's and Goebbels's propaganda campaigns, that would haunt many of the scientists who, in the aftermath of World War II, thrived to understand the impact of mass media technologies in the political arena. Orwell's central theme is the power of a government-controlled new media technology (the *telescreen*) in the shaping of a homogeneous pattern of thought. Accordingly, much of the work conducted in the decade following the war was shaped

by the concerns about the unprecedentedly powerful media (see Neuman, 1991, p.24).

Amidst a rapid industrialization and a growing urbanization, one line of thought in particular – the so-called mass-society approach – will have an important contribution for the theorization of Orwell's prophecies. In his review of post-war mass-society theory, Russell Neuman (1991, p.25) summarizes its main rationale. According to that line of thinking, the rapid urbanization of Europe and the United States and the consequent decline of family life, local community, religious and ethnic ties, weakens the individual's sense of identity and transforms the mass media in the only provider of a new centered identity. Its power over the rootless individual who desperately seeks a new sense of belonging is irresistibly tempting to the political elite.

Still according to Russell Neuman (1991, p.28), although the mass society approach to the study of media effects gradually loses its importance during the 60's, its main underlying theme – the Orwellian manipulation of the population by centralized media – remains present in several modern media theories. One can, for instance, recognize the same manipulation rationale in subsequent studies that, no longer focusing on the power of a political totalitarian elite controlling the media, emphasize the influence of subtle new powers. In this line of thought are, for example, the concerns about the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few corporations and their alleged domination of public opinion. Critics like Ben H. Bagdikian (1997) argue that a shrinking oligopoly of powerful corporate interests undermine the notion of a free marketplace of ideas (a notion fundamental to democracy)

by acting as gatekeepers to the flow of information. Common to many of these new conspiratorial theories is the notion that the power of the new elite no longer derives from a blatant manipulation of the media but from a subtler agenda-setting prerogative.

Finally, in an interesting derivation on the theme of mass media manipulation, some critics reintroduced a notion with deep roots in the American political history: the perils of excessive democracy. Unlike the French, the original American understanding of democracy is one that highly praises the value of liberty and one that is deeply suspicious of egalitarianism. Whereas Rousseau praises the total alienation of individual rights in favor of the social body (*the common I*), Locke insists on the limitation of State power and on the preservation of individual rights. Whereas for Rousseau the *volonté générale* (i.e. the will of the majority) is the only source of political legitimacy, for Locke the basic individual rights are natural, pre-political and therefore unalienable even in favor of a clear majority. In a word: "The government of the uncontrolled numerical majority is but the absolute and despotic form of popular government, just as the uncontrolled will of one man is monarchy." (See Grossman, 1995, p.173)

It is in fact in this line of thought (on that sees the totalitarian citizen as the other face of the totalitarian state), that some modern pessimists reinterpret the effects of mass media in the political arena. For these critics, the mass media (and for this purpose also the new media that open way to instant polls and electronic plebiscites) are no longer seen as the instrument of a conspiratorial elite but as a means to empower the irrational impulses of the mob. They argue that they are creating

a perverted democracy where the dichotomic simplification of political messages, the growing importance of scandal and personal politics and the imperialism of opinion polls, are the new rules and the new weapons of a political game whose only aim is to captivate an irrational mob. They fear a television-led democracy that "too readily will sacrifice important long term interests for highly visible short term gains." (See Grossman, 1995, p. 172).

Having reviewed these different streams of research, it seems clear that, either focusing on the power of a totalitarian state, of a subtle elite or of an irrational mob, they all converge in their view of an unconstrained and pervasive power of the mass media that endangers the democratic process.

But along with this skeptic and influential line of thought, evolved a much different approach to the problematic of media effects on politics. Rooted in the liberal belief of the centrality of a free marketplace of ideas for the development of democracy, a young group of scholars, in the years following the World War II, suggested the existence of a causal nexus between "the spread of knowledge and technology and the development of new markets, higher standards of living and lawful, humane and liberal politics" (See Neuman, 1995, p.33). For this corpus of research, the media, far from undermining democracy, were seen as its prerequisite. As Neuman summarizes (1995, p.35), the critical elements of this theory of communications and political development are: "1) the growth of literacy and communications institutions and 2) a corresponding psychological openness to diversity and change in the context of 3) gradual economic growth and crosscutting political pluralism".

Following this approach, a series of new studies, inspired by the technological capabilities of the so-called new media, further explored the idea that they have the power to drive politics in the direction of a revitalized democracy. Among the more popular are Alvin Toffler's (1980) and John Naisbitt's (1982) predictions celebrating a bright future characterized by abundance and diversity of information. Both approaches, although poorly elaborated from a theoretical point of view, underline the possibilities open by the new media to overcome the practical and operational difficulties that traditionally made unattainable the dream of direct democracy. According to these authors, not only do new media promise a universally available Alexandrian library (See Neuman, 1995, p.37), but they also assure the diversity of its content. And, more important, their two-way capabilities offer the citizen the means for a new kind of governance. Democracy, the reasoning goes, can only be reinforced.

Contrasting with these approaches (in the sense that it is backed by solid theoretical argumentation), another recent trend of literature highlights, in the tradition of Mill and Tocqueville, the potentialities of the new media in the recuperation of the communitarian ideal. Underlying this approach are two basic ideas. First, the notion that many of the failures of modern politics can be explained by a collapse of communication between citizens and government, that only a more participatory democracy (as it existed in the early years of American independence) can restore. Secondly, the idea that the *interconnectedness* of the new media confers them precisely the potential to reinvent democracy in a participatory mode.

Among these Neo-Tocquevilian authors, Benjamin Barber (1984) deserves a special reference. He is the mentor of a highly elaborated project of reconstruction of the democratic processes and institutions with the help of the new communication technologies. Believing that Democracy breeds further Democracy (i.e. as citizens succeed in voicing their views through democratic processes and institutions they tend to reinforce and support them), he puts forward a program of eleven institutional reforms intended to revitalize the citizen's role. Among these are the creation of a *Neighborhood-Assembly System*, a *Civic Communications Cooperative*, a *Civic Videotex Service* and a *National Initiative and Referendum Process*.

In a striking contrast therefore with the Madisonian fears of media-led democratic excesses, Barber suggests to reinforce Democracy with more Democracy, through the use of new media:

"It is obvious then that new technologies of information can be nurturing to Democracy. They can challenge passivity, they can enhance information equality, they can overcome sectarianism and prejudice, and they can facilitate participation in deliberative political processes. (...) Certainly Thomas Jefferson would not be disappointed to learn that technology has made possible a quality and degree of communication among citizens and between citizens and bureaucrats, experts and their information banks he could not have dreamed of. It was always Jefferson's belief that the inadequacies of Democracy were best remedied by more Democracy." (Barber, 1984, p.254).

### 3 An alternative approach: Neuman's model of forces in tension

In the line of the studies of Toffler, Naisbit and Barber, Russell Neuman's main goal in his work *The future of Mass Audience* (Neuman, 1991) is the evaluation of the political impact of the new media. But in contrast with those approaches (and, in this regard, in contrast with the mass media studies described above), Russell Neuman refuses the adoption of a simple causal model. Rejecting the view that technological forces determine social structure and cultural values, and believing that they rather interact with them, Neuman builds a model based in three major variables. Although still recognizing the influence of new media's technological characteristics (which support the main rationale of the discussed models) he brings both the psychology of mass audience and the political economy of mass media into consideration.

Neuman's starting point (and the first variable of his study) is then the technical and economic properties of new media. He identifies nine major technical characteristics of these new media:

- A decreasing cost
- A decreasing distance sensitivity
- An increasing speed
- An increasing volume
- An increasing channel diversity
- An increasing two way flow

- An increasing flexibility (in the sense they increase the ability of the user to select, control and manipulate the information).
- An increasing extensibility (i.e. an increased capacity to upgrade and expand the capacity of the system that is characteristic of software based technologies)
- An increasing interconnectivity (that leads to a blurring of boundaries and a convergence of delivery systems, transforming once unique and non-competitive media in economic competitors).

Taken together – argues Neuman – these characteristics will constitute a force in favor of pluralism and of a more active citizenry. "The greater ease with which different communications media can be connected with each other, the dramatic growth in new channels of high quality, two-way communication, and the development of user-controlled electronic intelligence and information processing lead strongly in the direction of diverse, pluralistic communications flows controlled by the citizenry rather than by central authorities. (...) On the balance, then, the new technologies tend to shift control of the communications process from the producer to the audience member. Given the basic values of democratic pluralism, that is good news."(Neuman, 1991, p.77).

But if the technological characteristics of the new media seem to favor Toffler's and Barber's conclusions, the psychology of media use (the second variable under Neuman's consideration) seems to point in another direction. In fact, Neuman suggests that "although typical television viewers and

newspaper readers are not passive, dumb-founded, and effortlessly persuaded by each and every message, neither are they for the most part, attentive and alert information seekers" (Neuman, 1991, p.94). The audience member, he believes, is both active and passive at the same time. He doesn't approach television with a clear game plan for what he wants to learn from it. He is not the rational, active and purposive media user that some theories suggest. The process of obtaining and processing information has costs and people tend to *satisfice* rather than maximize their information needs.

To reinforce his findings Neuman backs them by scientific evidence. Several studies prove, for example, that media use is part of the fabric of daily life and that at least a third of the time, television viewing is a secondary activity (See Neuman, 1991, p.95). "In a study of recall of network news programming on television, subjects were called at random in the evening and asked if they had watched the news that evening, and if so what they could recall of what they had just seen. On average, respondents could recall only one news story out of 20" (see Neuman, 1991, p.92). "And even those who claim to attend to the media for purposes of acquiring information do score slightly higher on tests of learning and recall but the differences are surprisingly small" (see Neuman, 1991, p.95).

Still according to Neuman, these conclusions are as valid for traditional mass media as they are for new interactive media. In contrast with McLuhan's hypotheses, Neuman argues that "reviews of literature have come up with a dramatically and counterintuitive verdict (...): there is no evidence of consistent or significant differences in the abi-

lities of different media to persuade, inform, or even to instill an emotional response in audience members" (Neuman, 1991, p.99).

In short, the force and impact of the technological communications revolution will be highly constrained by the limited attentiveness of the audience. Although the new information technologies make new forms of education and public participation possible, "deeply ingrained habits of passive, half attentive media use constrain that potential".

But still other forces work to limit the potential impact of new media: the economic forces toward homogenization. Although, as we have seen, the technological characteristics of new media tend to favor diversity of ownership and content, the reality of the American communications industry seems to tell another story. A great deal of concentration can in fact be observed. This is true in terms of products for which, according to Neuman (1991, p.139), 80% of the income is derived from 20% of the titles. It is true in terms of formats, for which there is a "law-like dynamic whereby, over times, fads in the popular genres and formats rise and fall, but the domination of a few popular formats is a consistent organizing principle" (Neuman, 1991, p.141). It is still true in terms of markets and, finally, in terms of firms.

Behind these figures are, according to Neuman, several economic pressures that tend to favor homogenization. In the demand side, studies seem to show that, although there are exceptions, people within a given cultural setting display homogeneous tastes (Neuman, 1991, p.115 to p. 128 and p.146). But it is in the supply side that Neuman identifies most of the causes toward homogenization (Neuman, 1991, p.146 to p.152):

- Economies of scale for information commodities are dramatically higher than for other commodities. The cost of writing a book, for example, is substantial, but the manufacturing costs for its subsequent copies are much lower.
- Economies of scale in the production processes of information goods also favor concentration (e.g. larger studios can distribute its fixed costs by several productions achieving lower costs per production).
- A critical mass is necessary for a player to succeed in the communications industry. Not only the capitalization necessary is for some media quite substantial (e.g. to build a studio), but the profitability volatility of selling individual communications products (e.g. a feature film) makes it more rational to produce a substantial number of products each year (big studios rely on the probability of producing one hit along with many failures) thus further increasing that necessary capitalization.
- In the case of most information products, unlike what happens with cereals or soaps, the promotion costs must be borne by a single item, as the consumers will buy only one. This economic constraint doesn't favor diversity.
- Finally, the industry culture itself reinforces the pressures toward homogenization. *Whenever there is a breakthrough hit with some unique characteristics, there soon will be an overflowing supply of very similar copies and spin-offs on the market.*

Neuman's model, as we observe, is therefore a model of contradictory forces in tension. It is not constructed around a single variable but rather relies in the interaction of multiple factors. It can be graphically summarized as follows:

#### **4 Neuman's approach in the context of media effects analysis**

In his introductory remarks on methodology, Russell Neuman distinguishes two kinds of studies analyzing social changes: monist theories that identify a single determining mechanism of change, and balanced theories that emphasize "multiple variable and the interactions of multiple social domains and levels of analysis"(Neuman, 1991, p.15).

Among the former he includes the works of Marx (for which the key explanatory mechanism is the ownership of the means of production), of Adam Smith (emphasizing market mechanisms) and of Freud (concentrating on infantile sexuality). All of these works, it is evident to say, are major intellectual contributes. Each of them identifies a phenomenon "previously misunderstood or ignored"that only becomes clear when an intellectual pioneer overemphasizes its causal effects. But although those works are helpful in drawing our attention to a new phenomenon, they ignore the fact that social transformation is not only the result of overlapping forces but also of their interaction with each other. The "lure of monism", as Neuman calls it, is therefore to take the tree for the whole forest, and to propose a holistic explanation for social change based in a single causal relationship. And history has pro-

ved notoriously unkind to single-minded and determinist prophecies: let's not forget, for example, that Marx predicted the ultimate end of the state and the inevitable advent of the communist society.

In contrast with these monist theories Neuman describes what he calls balance theories: "Neither uncausal nor deterministic, such theories assess the balance of opposing and overlapping forces and pursue a more complex teleology of multiple means and ends (...). Such analyses are perhaps less dramatic and normatively urgent, but ultimately more satisfying. It is important to trace the interpenetration of different levels of analysis as psychological, institutional, cultural, and economic factors intertwine" (Neuman, 1991, pgs.15 and 18).

We personally believe that it is precisely in his deliberate choice to approach the issue of media impact on politics within the framework of a multivariable balance model (and not in the actual accuracy of his specific final model) that rests the ultimate relevance of Neuman's work. In the tradition of Joseph Klapper's *limited effects model of media influence* (see Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney, 1998, p.277) Neuman's work rests on the fundamental assumption that media are "rarely, if ever, a necessary and sufficient cause of public behavior", but affect it instead "through a web of other influencing factors, such as personality characteristics, social situations, and general climates of opinion and culture" (Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney, 1998, p.277).

By doing so Neuman sets his work apart from that of technological determinists who are simplistically predicting the way in which new media will inevitably democratize politics or foster authoritarian regimes.

But, more important, by integrating the technological characteristics of the new media in his analytical model, he also avoids the pitfall of political determinism and its underlying assumption that technical aspects do not matter at all.

Critics of this kind of approaches may correctly point out that they are hardly conclusive. But in the broader context of media effects studies, multivariable models have at least the virtue of insulating us from simplistic arguments for media control or regulation, without easing the burden of our decisions by simply denying the existence of media effects in our individual and collective behavior.

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