

# Research on Media and Democracy

## *Reflections on Changes and Challenges*

MATS EKSTRÖM

I have been asked to give some reflections on media power and democracy from a Swedish perspective, concerning large, broad and complicated questions such as: How has the media's role changed with regard to democracy and the political system during the past decades? What are the most interesting challenges likely to take place in the future? I will do this in 15 minutes.

Figuring out what is new and not new when it comes to the roles of the media in democracy is not easy. Reading the literature, however, it seems to be easy to exaggerate transformations and revolutionary changes in contemporary society. I thought it was a good idea to go back and start from the outcome of two large-scale national investigations of power and democracy initiated by the Swedish government during recent decades.

Today, it is approximately twenty years since the Swedish investigation of power ("Maktutredningen"), and ten years since the investigation of democracy ("Demokratiutredningen") were started. In both cases, a large group of researchers from different disciplines were involved, and a great deal of emphasis was put on media analysis. Let me start by summarizing some main arguments and conclusions from these investigations. I believe these investigations articulated some perspectives on the media, power and democracy that were predominant and typical during the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After looking at the investigations, I will then ask the question: What has happen since then, and what are the most significant challenges for future research? Of course it is only possible to focus on some aspects of this very broad area of research.

Three main conclusions from "Maktutredningen" can be summarized as follows (my interpretation):

1. The (mass) media have an enormous influence on people's thoughts and understanding of the world, on opinions and on definitions of the political (and what constitutes a political problem).
2. The media are both powerful actors in their own right and constitute an arena used by other power groups in society to control the distribution of information. The activities and methods used to manipulate opinions are developed and intensified and are increasingly important in business and politics.
3. The media are characterized by increasing commercialization and concentration of power, dominated by a highly professionalized, powerful and autonomous journalism, and what is called media logic.

These conclusions are closely related to an understanding of the media, a kind of implicit presupposition in a great deal of research, characterized by the following:

1. The notion of media is equal to mass media, and in fact about 90 percent equal to news journalism in the press, radio and TV.
2. Media is understood as a coherent and central power institution in society. Media is conceptualized as “The media”.
3. Media power is understood in relation to a broadcast model in which power is mainly localized to media production.

The conclusions from “Demokratiutredningen” were very much the same. It was emphasized that the power struggle in society is largely a struggle for media attention. Related to this is the intensification of lobbying activities. The spectacularization of politics was described as an important consequence of media logic. And what is perhaps the most significant difference compared to “Maktutredningen”, the Internet and new communication technologies were described as unexploited potentials for the development of democracy, mainly in terms of citizen participation and power.

So what has happened in the period following these investigations? And what perspectives and conclusion do we have to reconsider? Here are some reflections.

### **The End of the Media?**

According to Paddy Scannell (in his highly recommended new book *Media and Communication*, published this year), the concept of “The Media” was established in the 1960s, and Marshall McLuhan’s work was of course groundbreaking. In this context, Scannell also quotes Hans Fredrik Dahl who writes, and I quote:

The aggregation of disparate media of communication into a synthetic whole – ‘the media’ is a very recent phenomenon, perhaps coinciding with the rise of television in early 1960s as the dominant information and entertainment medium.

In my opinion, the concept of “the media” is best understood and used as closely connected to a particular historical period in the trajectory of media analysis – from the 1960s to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The concept of “the media” is quite often used in the debate and literature on media and power, for example when discussing whether the media are a weak or a strong force in politics, whether the power of the media is increasing or decreasing, whether political institutions or the media are most powerful, and whether the media have primarily positive or negative effects on democracy. This conceptualization of the media was frequently used in Swedish investigations of power and was part of the main conclusions.

I think the concept of “the media” is confusing and misleading for several reasons: It is not clear whether the media relates to technologies, modalities, language or social institutions. Quite often it seems to mean journalistic practices. The concept tends to blur a number of different technologies and practices with totally different implications for power relations in society. The media today do not at all constitute a coherent technology or institution. Talking about power as localized to “the media”, and not to specific groups, actors or social relations, also tends to mystify what is going on. Sometimes it seems to imply that we could have politics or everyday life with or without “the media”.

In a recently published article (in *European Journal of Political Research*), for example, Kenneth Newton draws the following conclusion concerning media and power:

In spite of all that has been written about media malaise, however, both theory and evidence suggest that the media are a comparatively weak force whose effects can be deflected, diluted and diffused by stronger forces.

The media as a concept (in this kind of argumentation) seems to imply that the distinction between mediated and non-mediated practices is an important one in the analysis of power and democracy. I do not agree.

In Swedish research on the media, power and democracy, the conceptualization of “the media” has been closely related to an understanding of a few mass media institutions as quite homogenous centres of the media landscape. The flow of news in society is supposed to be controlled by these institutions, and it is the agenda set by them that the power struggle and the intensification of news marketing and lobbying activities are about. But just as, for example, Bolin, Feilitzen and Åker argue in their introduction to *Media Sweden 2007 Statistics and Analysis* (published by Nordicom), there are reasons to question this idea as a point of departure in an analysis of media and power. Media output and consumption are becoming more and more fragmented. For instance, the tendency is to move away from dominating TV channels with a large and loyal audience that is broad in scope. The audiences of not only Swedish public service television, but also TV 4 are declining. In the new media landscape, including online communication, the distribution of news and information is not controlled by traditional mass media institutions to the extent that it has been. The traditional concept of news distribution and the power of gate-keeping journalists are partly challenged.

The understanding of power as localized to a few central media institutions is also closely linked to the production-consumption separation in the traditional broadcast model. In the media-related parts of the Swedish investigation of power (“Maktutredningen”), citizens were mainly understood as recipients of mass media products. As a dominant media model, this model seems to be increasingly obsolete. People are also active agents, who use media for different purposes and make choices in a media landscape offering different opportunities.

Of course, questioning “the media” concept is not the same as saying that news distribution is totally decentralized or that there are no powerful media institutions. But instead of taking the media centre as a self-evident point of departure, it seems to be more relevant to focus on tendencies towards centralization and decentralization, homogenization and fragmentation of news distribution on national and transnational levels.

### **Journalism under Pressure?**

Both “Maktutredningen” and “Demokratiutredningen” placed journalism (and what is also conceptualized as a journalistic ideology) at the centre of media studies. It was relevant to do so. Just as, for example, Hallin and Mancini argue in the book *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*, Sweden and the other Nordic countries are the most clear-cut examples of what they call the “Democratic Corporatist Model”. This model is partly characterized by a strong, highly autonomous and professionalized journalism (built on common standards and self-regulation). To a large extent, the analysis of media and democracy has taken this position of journalism for granted. But professionalized journalism seems to be under pressure. At least partly as

a consequence of intensified commercialization and a changing news market, the common standards of journalism and the principals of self-regulation are being challenged. The distinction between journalism and non-journalism seems to be more problematic in the new media landscape. This does not call into question the fact that professional journalism still plays a central democratic role by, for example, making corruption and non-transparent decision-making more difficult and risky.

### **The Internet as a Contested Terrain: From Democratic Potentiality to Actuality**

In the Swedish “Demokratiutredningen”, the Internet was described as something that could be promising for the development of democracy and citizen participation, and something that could be an important part of politics. In a recently published article, Douglas Kellner (2007) instead describes the Internet as a “normalized aspect of politics, just as the broadcast media were some decades ago”. What was described 10 or 20 years ago as new media, including a number of potentialities, is today an ordinary and diversified communicative infrastructure with significant democratic implications. The young students that we now meet at the universities are the first generation to have grown up from the very beginning in a media landscape in which computer-based communication technologies are the most natural and most evident infrastructure and modality for a number of different activities in everyday life. This is also an infrastructure for various forms of public communication, which forces us to rethink the conditions and practices of democracy.

A large number of Internet-based activities are of course mainly part of a consumer culture, thus they are more about private consumption, play, entertainment and lifestyle, than about politics and the common good. But new communication technologies have also opened up new forms of public orientation, an explosion of public talk, a rich and intensified public debate in the form of blogging, cultural jamming, campaigning, cyberprotesting and file sharing that are of political significance (Dahlgren and Olsson 2006, Kahn and Kellner 2007, Loader 2007).

Online activities are perhaps part of a more fragmented and individualized public sphere compared to the model of the public sphere implied in the Swedish investigations of power and democracy. But online activities using different web facilities are also part of organized activities, social movements and campaigns, not least in relation to global political questions. Like everyday life in general, online is a contested terrain. Internet use can be part of both public withdrawal and public connectedness. Internet as a contested terrain is perhaps most obviously demonstrated in activities (and the debates following) involving blocking and controlling websites that challenge the centralized forms of information distribution in non-democratic political systems.

During recent years, for instance, we have witnessed an enormous expansion of blogging. What was a peculiar phenomenon just a few years ago is now a natural and widely accepted part of the everyday life of public discourse. Certainly, it is both possible and appropriate to interpret the blogging taking place in different genres and settings as an expression of a narcissistic culture of self-occupied people, sexual self-promotions, or an extreme version of what David Riesman, in the *Lonely Crowd* (published in 1950), described as the “other directed individual”. Most blogs are private diaries made public, but of interest to only very limited audiences. Nonetheless, blogging is also a manifestation of people’s enthusiasm for articulating opinions in public, if there are relevant and

engaging conditions available. All bloggings are not political bloggings, and we still do not know a great deal about the political effects of blogging, but as Kahn and Kellner emphasize (in the article “New media and Internet activism”) “the success of blogging should not be judged solely on whether it generates obvious political effects.” Part of the success of blogging is that it is a form for publication that is cheap and easy to create and continue, without requiring any great technical competence. Today, blogging is an important infrastructure for people’s involvement in the public, for ongoing debates partly on questions of the common good, for the spread of information alternatives to the news agenda in the dominant mass media. One thing is clear, online is a public space that is much more attractive, open, vital and easy to access and act in than is the public space of the journalist controlled and commercialized mass media.

In my opinion, the preconditions and practices of different online activities are so important to investigate from a democratic perspective because the practices of citizenship, of doing democracy, are largely a question of acting by speaking in public, of formation of the public will, and of political judgment in (direct or indirect) dialogues. The modes and preconditions of political judgment in public talk are part of the core of democracy. This also means that we take an agency perspective on media, citizenship and democracy instead of the ‘elite media – passive citizenship’ perspective that dominated the media-related part of the Swedish investigation of power mentioned above.

Even if the Swedish investigation of power included a study of ordinary people’s participation in political activities and use of the press in making one’s voice heard, the dominant perspective concerned the media’s power over people’s thoughts. It was (like a lot of research in the area) characterized by a kind of anxiety about media manipulation of people’s attitudes and choices. The mechanisms of power and the question of ‘personal influence’ were not investigated empirically (or discussed theoretically) in “Maktutredningen” or “Demokratiutredningen”. The manipulated mass audience was implied in an analysis of media and power with a strong cognitive bias. I think it is clear that the affordances of contemporary communication technologies have opened up new possibilities and forms of public engagement, which have to be understood and evaluated not only or primarily from a cognitive perspective, but also from an agency perspective. In blogs, chat, news groups, debates and Net activism of different kinds, citizens are primarily not spoken of or spoken for, but speak themselves in public.

### **Media Use and the Development of Democratic Citizenship**

I think few people will protest if I argue that the media constitute powerful socialization arenas for young people in contemporary society. The fact that media are embedded in most parts of young people’s everyday life seems to mean that it is, as Livingstone and Hargrave (2006) write, “implausible to suggest that they have no influence, whether positive or negative”. Some researchers argue that media activities are essential in the horizontal networks that play an increasingly significant role, compared to the vertical relations in family and school, with regard to socialization and cultural transmission (Pasquier 2002).

A reasonable hypothesis is that media-related activities also play an important role in political socialization or more precisely in the development of civic identities, political orientations, values, skills and patterns of political participation in the period from adolescence to young adulthood (cf. Dahlgren 2007, Dahlgren and Olsson 2007, McLeod 2000). Studying media-related mechanisms and processes in the development

of civic identities would seem to be a very important part of the research on media and democracy. However, media activities should not be studied in isolation. As Livingstone (2002) argues, the media are so important in young people's everyday life because they are an integral part of relations and communication in the family, in school and among peers. In a new research programme recently developed at Örebro University, in collaboration with a number of international scholars, it is our ambition to set up a large-scale longitudinal study on processes of political socialization in the interrelations between different contexts of everyday life.

In media studies, the literature on young people and their relations to politics has largely been influenced by an optimistic as opposed to a pessimistic point of view (Buckingham 2000, Livingstone 2002, Loader 2007). From the pessimistic point of view, it has been argued that the preconditions for political citizenship (active participation and power) have partly disappeared and it has been replaced by a consumer society, a self-centred individualistic culture based on privatised lifestyles, and a political system that effectively excludes not only young people, but most of the people. Political ignorance, cynicism, distrust in politicians and political institutions, political apathy, decrease in voting and membership in political parties, are just rational responses to real powerlessness. Media consumption is referred to as a driving force causing significant changes in youth culture and political culture. Young people do not participate enough in political institutions, they do not learn about politics from the news, they are fed up with politics, however they do spend considerable time on media entertainment and consumption.

The optimists, on the other hand, stress the opportunities for new forms of democratic involvement and public debates. They see the decrease in voting and membership in political parties and traditional organizations not necessarily as signs of political ignorance or apathy, but as signs of a more pluralistic political culture, including new forms of political participation, engagement and protests, and a more diversified public sphere, growing partly out of new communication technologies. Media entertainment has not necessarily diverted people's interest away from politics, but the forms of political engagement have changed. Coleman (2007) argues that "it is not young people who have disengaged from politics ... but contemporary political culture that has become disconnected from the language, values and aspirations of young people". Those adhering to this perspective argue that there is a growing gap between the culture, practices and institutions of traditional politics, on the one hand, and the contemporary media and lifestyle-oriented youth culture, on the other. This perspective focuses on informal relations, interaction outside traditional political institutions, and on the varieties of possible public engagement available online.

In this area of research on media and the development of civic orientations, which I believe is very important, we can see a recent trend moving from mainly theoretical and partly speculative debates and diagnoses of what is good and bad, towards more empirical research on the media and civic orientation (see, e.g., Dahlgren and Olsson 2007, Couldry, Livingstone and Markham 2007).

Previously research on media and political socialization has been highly focused on the importance of news consumption. The low level and decline in news consumption among youth is well documented (Buckingham 2000, *MedieSverige* 2007), and it is commonly assumed that this can explain the low levels of political knowledge and the decrease in voting (Buckingham 2000). However, in a situation in which the Internet has radically changed the patterns of media use among young people, it is perhaps not so relevant to study the effects of a decrease in traditional forms of news consumption.

A more interesting question is what the new forms of online-based activities really mean in terms of political socialization and civic orientations.

Buckingham (2000 p 217) draws the following conclusions: “While they (young people) may be alienated from political parties, from voting and from other conventional forms of political activity, young people are nevertheless seen to be developing a broader, and no less valid, form of politics, that reflects changing social and historical circumstances. This is certainly an important response, although the evidence would suggest that young people’s active involvement in these ‘new’ forms of politics is still confined to a small minority.”

While some researchers have stressed the social withdrawal effect of media use, others have presented empirical support for the idea that media consumption has created new forms for public connectedness and extended the group of people informed about politics. Regarding the role of the Internet in political socialization, there is an important debate going on between the normalization thesis and the expanding thesis. Empirical studies have shown that online activities tend to normalize the off-line gap and inequality in political engagement. Those already interested use the Internet to reinforce their levels of engagement, and the less engaged use the Internet in a way that makes them even more disengaged and politically inactive. But there is also a growing number of studies questioning the normalization thesis by showing that it is partly different groups of young people who are engaged in online politics and traditional forms of politics, and that the Internet in fact has a strong potential to expand the group of politically active individuals (Couldry et al. 2006, Krueger 2002, Norris 2001, Gibson et al. 2005). This is just one of a number of important empirical questions concerning the media and the development of democratic citizenship that I feel we have to pay attention to.

## References

- Buckingham, D. (2000) *The Making of Citizens. Young People News and Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Carlsson, Ulla & Facht, Ulrika (reds.) (2007) *MedieSverige 2007. Statistik och analys* Göteborg: Nordicom.
- Coleman, S. (2007) ‘How Democracies Have Disengaged From Young People’, in Loader, B. (ed.) *Young Citizens in the Digital Age: Young People, Citizenship, and ICTs*. London: Routledge.
- Couldry, N., Livingstone, S., & Markham, T. (2006) *Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection*. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.
- Couldry, N., Livingstone, S., & Markham, T. (2007) *Media Consumption and Public Engagement: Beyond the Presumption of Attention*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dahlgren, P. (ed.) (2007) *Young Citizens and New Media*. New York: Routledge.
- Dahlgren, P., & Olsson, T. (2006) ‘Facilitating Political Participation: Young Citizens, Internet and Civic Cultures’, in S. Livingstone & K. Drotner (eds.), *International Handbook of Children, Media and Culture*. London: Sage.
- Dahlgren, P., & Olsson, T. (2007) ‘Young Activists, Political Horizons, and the Internet: Adapting the Net to One’s purposes’, in B. Loader (ed.) *Young Citizens in the Digital Age: Political Engagement, Young People and New Media*. London: Routledge.
- Gibson, R.K., Lusoli, W., & Ward, S. (2005) ‘Online Participation in the UK: Testing a ‘Contextualised’ Model of Internet Effects’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 7, 561-583.
- Kahn, R., & Kellner, D. (2007) ‘Globalization, Technopolitics, and Radical Democracy’, in L. Dahlberg & E. Siaper (eds.) *Radical Democracy and the Internet: Interrogating Theory and Practice*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Krueger, B. (2002) ‘Assessing the Potential of Internet Political Participation in the United States: A Resource Approach’. *American Political Research*, 30, 476-498.
- Livingstone, S. (2002) *Young People and New Media*. London: Sage.
- Livingstone, S., & Hargrave, A. (2006) ‘Harmful to Children? Drawing Conclusions from Empirical Research on Media Effects’, in U. Carlsson & C. von Feilitzen (eds.), *In the Service of Young People*. Göteborg: Nordicom.

- Loader, B. (ed.) (2007) *Young Citizens in the Digital Age: Political Engagement, Young People and New Media*. London: Routledge.
- McLeod, J. (2000) 'Media and Civic Socialization of Youth', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 27, 45-51.
- Newton, K. (2006) 'May the Weak Force be with You: The Power of the Mass Media in Modern Politics', *European Journal of Political Research*. 45(2) 209-234.
- Norris, P. (2001) *Digital Divide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pasquier, D. (2002) 'Les 'savoirs minuscules'. Le rôle des médias dans l'exploration des identités de sexe', *Education et Sociétés* 2(10) 35-44.
- Riesman, D. (1950) *The Lonely Crowd*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Scannell, P (2007) *Media and Communication*. London: Sage.