



**Second Edition**

# **Politics and the Media**

**Edited by Geoff Kemp, Babak Bahador,  
Kate McMillan and Chris Rudd**

Journalists and presidents, hacks and spin doctors, media moguls and prime ministers: in New Zealand and around the world, politics and the media are deeply intertwined. *Politics and the Media* is the second edition of New Zealand's leading introduction to the subject.

The book introduces students to the rich literature on media and politics internationally, covering history, political economy and contemporary trends, and then analyses the particular shape of the media in New Zealand and its political role. The second edition features extensive coverage of the 2014 'Dirty Politics' campaign, the increasing importance of online media, and updated material in all chapters.

*Politics and the Media* is edited by **Geoff Kemp, Babak Bahador, Kate McMillan** and **Chris Rudd**, all senior lecturers in politics at, respectively, the universities of Auckland, Canterbury, Victoria and Otago. Other contributions from **Sue Abel, Maria Armoudian, Joe Atkinson, Mark Boyd, Margie Comrie, Geoffrey Craig, Bryce Edwards, Gavin Ellis, Susan Fountaine, Donald Matheson, Ashley Murchison** and **Kate Roff**.

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# Media, Politics and Democracy

Geoff Kemp

## Introduction: defining politics and media

I happen to be the first to welcome you to this book about politics and the media, but I want *you* to contribute some words as we begin exploring this important subject. I have a simple task for you. Write down a short sentence with the word ‘media’ in it, somewhere near the beginning. Go on, any sentence will do – it doesn’t have to be profound, though it should be a full sentence rather than a txt msg.

Time’s up. Stop writing.

Hands up, those who wrote ‘the media is . . .’ something or other. And hands up, those who wrote ‘the media are . . .’ something. Well, some of you opted for ‘is’, some of you opted for ‘are’; both are correct, so full marks all round.

We have now made a start in defining our subject. The authoritative *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* notes that some language purists object to the use of ‘media’ as a singular noun rather than as the plural form of ‘medium’ (which it defines as ‘an intermediate agency’, ‘a channel of communication

or expression'). But the *OED* itself endorses today's common mixed usage of 'media' as singular and plural. It defines 'media' as 'the main means of mass communication, especially newspapers, radio and television, regarded collectively'. As we know, the media involves a variety or *plurality* of mediums, companies, news outlets and views, both offline and online. Nevertheless, as the media academic Todd Gitlin remarks, 'something in our experience makes us want to address the media as "it" . . . we sense something like a unity at work' (Gitlin 2002, p. 7).

This is intriguing because the ability of the word 'media' to stand for both singular and plural entities is part of what might be called the mystery of media, intimately related to what might equally be called the puzzle of politics. We are all part of the puzzle, because we are simultaneously individuals and a part of the public. The *OED* notes that 'the public', like 'the media', can be singular or plural. It defines the public as people regarded collectively, in at least two ways – first, as a readership or audience, and second, as the 'community or people as an organized body, the body politic, the nation, the state'. The puzzle is how a multitude of individuals constitute and operate as a political community, a political public. The mystery is how a multitude of media sometimes seems to be not only a single, collective 'thing' but as such might form a counterpart to the public and to government, informing and giving voice to 'the people' as the rightful authority in modern democracy. These three entities – the media, government, and the public – are our subject.

This puzzle has troubled political thinkers for 2500 years; the mystery is a product of the modern development of media along with representative and democratic government. The next chapter will look back on some of that history. This first chapter will offer an overview of the relationship between the media, politics and the public within modern liberal democracy, introducing some of the concepts involved and identifying five roles the media plays in politics. Later chapters will elaborate and provide empirical and critical analysis of key areas of the relationship, with the first half of the book having an international and comparative perspective and the second half focusing on New Zealand media and political communication.

## Media and the political community

Politics is important, affecting our lives in all kinds of ways from national involvement in war to interest rates on student loans. The media is (or are) important as a major source of views and values consumed for five or more hours a day by the average New Zealander – about three hours TV, plus time shared between radio and print media and increasingly spent online (Nielsen 2015). The connection between politics and media is crucially important because the media influences election outcomes and government actions by informing the public, fostering debate and conveying public attitudes to political leaders. *Te Ara*, the online *Encyclopedia of New Zealand* – a public resource in the dual sense of being government backed and freely accessible – opens its section on media and politics in this way: ‘The media plays a vital role in a democracy, informing the public about political issues and acting as a watchdog against abuses of power’ (McMillan 2013). In fact, we can already distinguish several roles for the media in relation to democratic politics and the political public:

*informational* – conveying news and political information

*deliberative* – fostering exchanges of views and knowledge

*representative* – reflecting and conveying public opinion; and

an *accountability* or *watchdog* function – ensuring that those in power are answerable to the public.

At the same time, a prior question seems to lurk in the positioning of ‘the media’ and ‘the public’ as givens, as if the public is simply *there* and the media informs it. We might consider this a further dimension of the relation between media and politics, a fifth role, though in some ways the first of all, which could be called a *constitutive* role, where the media sustains the forum in which the other four roles operate.

These five roles can be gathered into the easy-to-remember acronym CIDRA – constitutive, informational, deliberative, representative, accountability.

The constitutive role sheds light on the puzzle mentioned earlier. The thought here is that media helps to constitute the public as a public, since what is out there in the world are lots of individual people, talking now and then to other individuals. Think back to when I asked you to write a sentence and then noted that some of you wrote 'is' and some of you wrote 'are'. Did you wonder about this plural 'you', thinking 'Wait a minute, there's only *me*, reading alone'? Or did you share the assumption that you were one among numerous readers, imagining yourself to be part of a group being addressed? (You may well have had both thoughts.) This imagined group is simultaneously a plurality of individual readers and, regarded collectively, a unity forged by shared address with a shared agenda of learning about politics and media. Such imaginative bonding relies on you thinking abstractly, but it also creates a type of 'social fact' since the group isn't simply imaginary: it involves real people who can be conceived of as a public that actually exists. You have become a self-conscious member of the public of this book.

Publics come in different sizes. This book's public is modest, but on a grander scale you and I are also self-conscious members of a public constituted by shared address and a shared agenda at the level of the political community, most obviously the level of national politics. The character of this shared consciousness is nicely captured in the title of Benedict Anderson's influential book on the development of the modern nation-state, *Imagined Communities* (1983). Numerous factors contribute to an individual's sense of national and political identity, stretching literally from birth (or birth-place) to death, but it is significant for our purposes that Anderson highlights media. He says the historical emergence of print media in Europe delivered 'forms of imagining', ranging from newspapers to novels, which led people to identify with their 'imagined political community' (p. 15). He follows the philosopher Hegel in describing the simultaneous reading of newspapers in the morning as a 'mass ceremony', though 'performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull' (p. 38). To re-situate Anderson's notion, when I watch *One News* or *3 News* at 6 p.m. this evening I know you may be watching too, along with almost a million others, in what is still New Zealand's largest (virtual) public gathering for news and politics. But *will* you be watching? The under-30s are

viewing less and less linear (real-time) television, a change in media use that invites us to think about how it may change politics too.

The media, then, has a constitutive role in the existence of a national political community as well as key functions in the operation of this political forum. The media's various roles overlap: delivering a national news agenda is both informational and constitutive, for instance. The media does not by itself 'make' the political community; it contributes to a process involving everyone and which no one controls, though politicians and the media itself may try. The media may involve a diversity of forms, outlets and views, with an audience divided on political issues, yet by shared address to that audience *as a political public* it can still sustain recognition of political community: membership need not be uniform or uncritical. New Zealanders who criticise the government or popular notions of 'being Kiwi' could still agree 'we are one' in some way, even while contesting claims to what 'we' really are. If there is no shared ground at all, normal politics cannot work. Relatedly, the media's public does not have one voice; the public as such does not say anything. But claims can be made about what the public thinks and feels, which carry influence in being more or less plausible as 'public opinion'.

Several more general points need to be made about the media. Clearly the media operates at multiple levels – from the grassroots to the global – in its organisation, content and distribution, but the nation-state and national media remain at the core of political decision-making, though an increasingly globalised media is a challenge facing traditional nation-states. Equally clearly, the media taken in its widest sense deals in entertainment more than news and political affairs. Entertainment can sometimes be political as one 'form of imagining' – broadcast funding agency NZ On Air has a remit from the state to 'reflect and develop New Zealand identity' in its diversity and commonality. This book's focus, however, is news media and political communication and journalism: the core area of concern in considering the media's relation to politics. Entertainment and news media are both largely embedded within a market-driven commercial structure where audiences and revenue are pursued (though justified concern at commercial pressures should not blind us to what media owes to money, as the rise of modern

democracies was enmeshed with national ‘print-capitalism’ [Anderson, p. 44]). Finally, new media technologies are changing the media’s constitutive and other roles, in terms of space and time and diversity. However, such change reconstitutes as well as dis-integrates – for instance, the *New Zealand Herald* being read online, blogs about government, message boards sharing media experiences, and so on. The nation-state and mainstream or legacy media remain central to imagined political community in the present, but politics and the media form a dynamic relationship.

## Politics as communication

The argument so far has been that the media contributes to the constitution of the basic unit of politics, the community or state within which politics takes place. The importance of media to politics goes further when we consider what politics *is*. Once again, we should not just assume politics is simply *there* and the media responds to it. Politics is often seen in terms of what government does, the policies implemented, or, in terms of voting at elections, the decision at the ballot box. But in some ways these are moments when politics is at an end, since politics is actually constituted by *communication* and *deliberation*, making the relationship with media central.

In the first-ever book titled *Politics* (around 330 BCE), Aristotle famously declared humankind to be ‘political animals’ led naturally by the power of speech to discuss with others what would be good or bad for their state (in his case, the ancient Greek *polis*, or city-state of citizens). Other thinkers, notably Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651), pointed out that words lead to quarrels as much as agreement, making a stable political state an artificial rather than natural outcome, agreed to as a way to deal with conflict. The modern theorist John Dunn sums up that politics involves ‘two great forces: the conflicts between our purposes, and our endeavours to co-operate to pursue these [purposes] more effectively’ (Dunn 2000, p. 136). Politics thus involves *conflict* and *cooperation* and the *communication* required to overcome the first and achieve the second (on media and conflict, see Chapter 8).

Today, 'political communication' is the term for communicating political news and views among politicians, news media and public. But communication is not just part of politics, it is the basis of politics. Aristotle spoke of politics in terms of 'deliberation', a word evoking the exchange and weighing of reasons and arguments (think *libra*, the scales), which in his time was by face-to-face discussion among citizens. Recent political theory has become very interested in 'deliberative democracy', not least because of a concern that modern media prevents more than promotes widespread reasoned and critical discussion in the public realm. The German theorist Jürgen Habermas proposes an influential model of what he terms the 'public sphere' of 'rational-critical' political discussion, in principle open to every member of the public but closed to undue state, commercial or sectional influence, instead relying only on the force of the better argument (Habermas 1989). This weighing of reasons, facts and arguments connects to the media's *deliberative* role.

However, the Latin root of the word deliberation evokes not only 'libra', weighing and balancing on the scales, but 'delivery' from such efforts. In other words, it means *de-liberation*, the decision that ends the process of freely deciding among alternatives. If we wanted another word for politics it could be deliberation in this broader sense of the overall process of de-liberation, for instance from the liberty of choosing between parties and policies to the selection of one, by politicians or citizens (and, in the New Zealand context, permanent residents who can vote). The act of voting at elections and the passing of policy in Parliament are moments at which politics stops, although elections lead to further deliberation in Parliament: the official who implements policy and the policeman who applies the law are not engaged in politics. This is why some theorists equate politics with freedom. Politics is not 'governing', the administration of public affairs, nor is it communication in general; it is the public-oriented process of political decision-making by communication, inside and outside government.

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