



COMMUNICATION AS THE INTERSECTION OF THE OLD AND THE NEW

THE INTELLECTUAL WORK OF THE 2018 EUROPEAN MEDIA
AND COMMUNICATION DOCTORAL SUMMER SCHOOL

**Edited by Maria Francesca Murru, Fausto Colombo,
Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Richard Kilborn, Risto
Kunelius, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Leif Kramp,
Nico Carpentier**

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edition Lumière
Bremen 2019

Bibliographische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliographie; detaillierte bibliographische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

© edition lumière Bremen

ISBN: 978-3-948077-03-7

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Series: The Researching and Teaching Communication Series

Series editors: Nico Carpentier and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

Electronic version accessible at: <http://www.researchingcommunication.eu>

The publishing of this book was supported by Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan, Italy) and the European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA). The 2018 European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School was sponsored by the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (Milan, Italy) and supported by the Department of Communication and Performing Arts of Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Almed - graduate School in Media, Communication and Performing Arts, and Sky Italy.

The photos that open every section and the abstracts are royalty free images downloaded from Unsplash. Authors: Silvio Kundt (Section 1); Samuel Zeller (Section 2 and Section 3), Joel Filipe (Section 4), Alvaro Pinot (Abstracts).

Table of Contents

- 7 Introduction: Communication as the intersection of the old and the new
Maria Francesca Murru, Laura Peja, Simone Tosoni, Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, Nico Carpentier

Section 1. Theories and Concepts

- 19 What kinds of normative theories do we need? Ideal and non-ideal theories in communication research
Kari Karppinen
- 31 Friends, not foes: Integrating structuralist and agentic perspectives on media consumption
Alyona Khaptsova, Ruben Vandenplas
- 45 The rise of the alternative: Critical usefulness of the “Alternative Media” notion in the Czech context
Ondrej Pekacek
- 59 “The closest thing to teleportation”: The concept of *liveness* in the age of connectivity
Ludmila Lupinacci
- 71 Crisis of liberal democracy, crisis of journalism? Learning from the economic crisis
Timo Harjuniemi

Section 2. Media and the Construction of Social Reality

- 85 The construction of the homeless in the Greek street paper *shedia*
Vaia Doudaki, Nico Carpentier
- 105 Mediation and place: The sharpening and weakening of boundaries
Magnus Andersson

- 115 “Yay! I am officially an #estonian #eResident!” Representations of Estonian e-residency as a novel kind of state-related status and affiliation on Twitter
Piia Tammppuu

Section 3. Mediatizations

- 129 Situational analysis as a research method for the reconstruction of communicative figurations
Karsten D. Wolf, Konstanze Wegmann
- 141 Football and mediatization: A serious academic pursuit or just scholars playing silly games?
Michael Skey

Section 4. Media, Health and Sociability

- 155 Tradition and the digital: A study of dating attitudes among Australia-based Chinese dating app users
Xu Chen
- 173 Visual matters in health communication: A systematic review
Fatma Nazlı Köksal, Fatoş Adiloğlu
- 185 Power to the patient? Studying the balance of power between patient and GP in relation to Web health information
Edgard Eeckman

Abstracts

- 199 Spanish TV fiction and social networks: Tweeting about *Cuéntame como pasó*
- 200 Repressed identity: Negotiating normality in the Balkan cinemas
- 201 Place of communication in territorial construction of “metropolitan public space”
- 202 Losing the critical edge: Why journalism has been unable to challenge the austerity hegemony
- 203 Professional and personal performances: Case studies of how selected photojournalists use conflict-related images on Instagram
- 204 Live, here and now: Experiences of *liveness* in everyday engagements with connective media
- 205 Audience experiences of interactivity in contemporary Lithuanian theatre: Production and evaluation

- 206 The telling of femicide in the voice of the Mexican press 2017
- 207 The evolution of the terms referring to people on the move:
A discursive analysis of media discourse in French and Dutch
- 208 The politics of participation in WhatsApp communities in rural Kenya:
Discursive-material analysis
- 209 Czech media and the refugee crisis: Media populism and journalistic culture
in mainstream and alternative news outlets
- 210 A digital public space: Just a theory? Or how social network sites are
perceived by their Norwegian users?
- 211 Mnemonic resistance to instant history: Polish contemporary feminist
movement and its practices of historical visibility
- 212 The concept of ‘virtual residency’ and digitally enabled translocality: The
case of Estonian e-residency
- 213 Digitizing our sense of touch: The social construction of haptic technologies
- 214 Revisiting media repertoires: The media use of the Flemish population
- 215 Young adults’ learning about sustainable consumption in informal ‘situations’
- 216 The rise and fall of a critical paradigm in media research and communication:
analysis elite western periodical publications 1935-2015
- 217 Michael Moore and documentary as persuasion
- 218 Dating apps and cultural contexts: Investigating how Australia-based
Chinese users engage with Tinder and Tantan
- 219 Individual values a basis for selective media exposure
- 220 The #Girlbosses of YouTube: Manifestations of feminism in the era of social
media and entrepreneurial femininity
- 221 How the blockchain technologies may impact the digital media content
creation and consumption
- 222 The role of cultural mind-mapping in intercultural business communication
between European and Chinese associates
- 223 The ideology of enjoyment: Images of enjoyment on Instagram

Crisis of liberal democracy, crisis of journalism? Learning from the economic crisis

Timo Harjuniemi

Abstract

This paper argues that the way journalism dealt with the global financial crisis, and with the European debt crisis, challenges us to rethink our common-sense notions about journalism's democratic role. As political decision-makers all over the Western world resorted to austerity to combat the crisis, journalism was quick to echo the austerity narrative. Due to its logics and practices, professional journalism discussed economic policy in a way that left little room for alternative ideas and worked to reinforce a post-democratic public sphere. By building on the lessons learned from the economic crisis, the paper argues that the popular disillusionment with journalism is hardly to be wondered at. The populist upheaval against institutions of liberal democracy—unleashed by the crisis and the politics of austerity—inevitably manifests itself also as a crisis of professional journalism; a crisis amplified by dramatic structural shifts in public communication. Thus, amid concerns about fake news and post-truth, we are faced with significant concerns about the future political and democratic role of journalism.

Keywords: austerity, journalism, democracy, liberalism, post-truth

1. Economic crisis and journalism

When the financial crisis took the global economy to the brink of total meltdown, world leaders resorted to unorthodox policy ideas to combat the crisis: stimulus packages were used all over the world to bail-out major financial institutions and stimulate economic activity (Tooze, 2018). For a while, it looked as if the crisis would deliver a blow to the legitimacy of neoliberalism. Dominant economic policies—emphasising deregulation and fiscal austerity—were supposedly making room for more Keynesian ideas. It seemed that once again, a crisis in the global economy would see a paradigm shift in economic policy ideas and institutions, as was the case with the emergence of the Keynesian hegemony after the Great Depression of the 1930s or with the neoliberal turn following the oil crises and economic turmoil of the early 1970s (see Hall, 1993).

However, a shift quickly occurred in economic policy-making. With the German government and the European Central Bank leading the charge, cutting public spending became the only game in town (Blyth, 2013). In Europe, political leaders decided to tackle the European debt crisis, triggered by the market panic concerning the Greek public deficit, with austerity policies and competitiveness-enhancing structural reforms. This caused not only social and economic hardships but popular disillusionment with the political status quo, as illustrated by the decline of mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties in Europe. European publics were repeatedly told that there was no alternative to the pain (Borriello, 2017), and new economic rules were put into practice with the aim of strengthening austerity policies already embedded in the European economic constitution (Streeck, 2015).

Indeed, the crisis did not result in a profound shift in the ideational “*blue-prints*” (Blyth, 2001: 2) of dominant economic-policy elites and institutions. Mainstream economists quickly found their confidence again and saw no reason to fundamentally adjust the orthodoxy of economic thought that had provided neoliberalism with both intellectual legitimacy and practical ideas (Mirowski, 2013). Dominant national policy institutions, such as ministries of finance, rapidly returned to the path of austerity policies and reforms (Harjuniemi & Ampuja, 2018). It was obvious that we were witnessing not so much the death but rather the “*strange non-death of neoliberalism*” (Crouch, 2011).

So, what is the role of journalism in all this? First, it needs to be plainly stated that journalism still matters. Despite the rapid rise of social media, issues of economic policy are still very much mediated via mainstream journalistic platforms. During economic crises, journalism is an arena where public contestations over the appro-

appropriate course of economic policy take place and where policy is legitimised (Chadwick, McDowell-Naylor, Smith, & Watts, 2018; Davis, 2018). In the aftermath of the crisis, journalism scholarship has shown that the consensus on the necessity of austerity policies has been widely disseminated by journalists (e.g. Doudaki, 2015; Berry, 2016). Despite the critical watchdog role given to journalism in liberal democracies (McNair, 2008), journalism has been unable to provide a platform for alternative voices in economic policy debates. Journalists have, for sure, given some room to critical and deviant voices, but the bigger picture is that journalism has circulated the ideas of the institutions and agents with the most alleged authority on economic policy issues (Ojala & Harjuniemi, 2016). Journalistic representations of the economic crisis have reflected the elite austerity consensus, rendering the sphere of “*legitimate controversy*” (Hallin, 1984: 21) on economic policy issues modest.

This paper deliberates why this has been the case and what the implications are for journalism. I will start by, briefly, sketching the democratic and public functions that journalism has traditionally been accorded by academic scholars. The liberal pluralist perspective emphasises that professional journalism should—and can—reflect a wide array of ideas and present the public with different views, allowing for an open public debate (see Curran, 2002; McNair, 2000). A contrasting perspective is provided by the more critical strand of journalism and media studies, emphasising the role of journalism in the construction and dissemination of hegemonic elite ideas (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Philo, Hewitt, & Beharrell, 1995). Then, in line with the critical view, I show that journalism has not worked to organise a pluralist debate on economic policy amid the economic crisis. On the contrary, journalism has, due to its internal logics and practices, worked to shield the status-quo and reinforced a “*post-democratic public sphere*” (Harjuniemi & Ampuja, 2018) where the dominant elite consensus is shielded from contesting voices and opinions.

Finally, and by building on the lessons from the economic crisis, the paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion about journalism’s legitimacy crisis, a crisis that manifests itself in concerns on “fake news” and “post-truth” and in authoritarian politicians’ attack on mainstream media. The argument presented here is straightforward: together with the rise of populist political movements, tapping into the anxieties unleashed by the crisis, these concerns over the disintegration of the rational public sphere signal a crisis in the post-World War II ideal of public communications and liberal political imaginary (Waisbord, 2018). As journalism has worked as the pedagogic branch of this world view (Jutel, 2013: 129-130), the current turmoil is inherently a crisis of the profession. This forces the trade and us, as scholars, to critically evaluate journalism’s democratic role and place in society.

2. Journalism, democracy and the critics

The nexus between journalism and democracy has been strong for centuries. Western political philosophers have been arguing for it since the Enlightenment, and from the late 19th century onwards, journalism has been seen as an essential force in supporting the optimal conditions for modern public life (Zelizer, 2012). Ideally, the press should be a space for rational and open debate on common issues and should work to integrate different parts of the society into a unified public sphere (Hampton, 2010: 4). In liberal thought, journalism is entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that members of the public have access to a diverse range of ideas that helps citizens to critically reflect on politics and on their own views as well. Indeed, professional journalism is central in facilitating public opinion and making democratic governance, based on popular consent, possible (Allan, 2004: 47). So when it comes to policy debates, journalism should provide the public with relevant and diverse information on the matter in hand (Nielsen, 2017). It is therefore vital that journalism detaches itself from vested interests in order to provide the public with unbiased knowledge. By committing to the core values of the profession—objectivity and neutrality, for example (Zelizer, 2004)—journalism tries to live up to this mission and present the public with untarnished facts acceptable to all (Muhlmann, 2008: 6-13).

Moreover, journalism contributes to the system of checks and balances, vital for pluralist democratic governance. An independent media and professional journalism are seen to serve a liberal pluralist society where power is distributed across different groups and institutions (Hardy, 2014: 39). Liberated from direct political control during the 19th and 20th centuries (Kaplan, 2002; Conboy, 2004), journalism, with its code of ethics and professional practices, took the role of an independent public watchdog with the mission of keeping an eye on the powerful on behalf of the people (Boyce, 1978; Schudson, 1978).

Members of the critical strand of journalism studies would, however, argue that journalistic representations of current affairs serve the interests of the powerful elites. Media logics, characterised by competition and a middle-of-the-road political stance (calibrated to speak to a mass consumer audience), works to render journalism hostile towards ideas that are too radical or too out of touch with the parameters of dominant opinion (Curran, 1978; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Moreover, the values and practices of professional journalism, such as dependency on elite sources, work to legitimise certain political positions as authoritative and marginalise others (Tuchman, 1978; Hallin, 1984). The boundaries of journalistic deliberation are constructed by the “*primary definers*” (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978: 57), people who allegedly possess the greatest authority

on the issue. In economic policy debates, this refers to political and administrative elites, economists, market analysts and financiers (Chakravartty & Schiller, 2010; Basu, 2018; Davis, 2018). As noted already by the scholars of the Glasgow Media Group (Philo et al., 1995), mainstream media discourse tends to treat elites as the voices of reason and guardians of the common good, whereas dissidents or, for example, labour union activists are often framed as irresponsible or reckless and solely concerned with their sectional interests.

3. Closing the austerity case

What do the journalistic representations of the economic crisis tell us about journalism and its ability to organise a pluralist exchange on economic policy? I argue that this makes a convincing case for employing the critical perspective, as the logics of journalism have, to a large extent, worked to disseminate the “necessary austerity” narrative.

First, the journalistic representations of the crisis illustrate the close-knit ties between journalistic outlets and the power elites. In Europe, the mainstream press has disseminated the orthodox view concerning the necessity of austerity and reforms and has marginalised alternative thought (Kay & Salter, 2014; Doudaki, Boubouka, Tzalavras, 2016; Kyriakidou & Garcia-Blanco, 2018). National and European elites have been able to use the newspapers to legitimise austerity and provide the public with a certain crisis interpretation, where the crisis has been defined as a problem of loose fiscal discipline and deteriorating economic competitiveness; failures that should be addressed by resorting to austerity and structural reforms (Ojala & Harjuniemi, 2016).

Journalistic representations of the crisis have thus accurately reflected the lack of alternatives presented by established political forces. For example, the Finnish economic policy discussion during the European debt crisis from the period of 2009 to 2014 illustrates how the journalistic mediation of the crisis reflected the ideas formed by the dominant institutions of Finnish economic policy-making (Harjuniemi & Ampuja, 2018). The public discourse rapidly followed suit when the Ministry of Finance, the bureaucratic stronghold of Finnish economic policy groupthink, started to demand austerity and reforms to the Finnish economy. Indeed, the journalistic representations of the economic crisis strongly support findings that journalists do not feel compelled to present opposing views on issues that are characterised by a strong elite consensus (Hallin, 1984).

That elite ideas dominate journalism is hardly surprising. Source-dependency has been well-established by journalism scholarship (e.g. Hall et al., 1978; Allan, 2004: 62-69; Knowles et al., 2017; Basu, 2018). Despite claims of independence, journalism—heavily dependent on the authoritative institutions that it is also supposed to keep an eye on—gives most space and legitimacy to those in power (Tuchman, 1978). It is, however, unsettling that the very historical virtues and professional routines developed to legitimise journalism’s status as the independent public watchdog work to restrict debates on such common issues as economic policy. As journalism, during the late 19th and 20th century, detached itself from partisan positions and morphed into its modern objective form (Schudson, 1978; Curran, 1978; Kaplan, 2002), the trade developed a semi-scientific identity characterised by strong modernist and Enlightenment values: reason, progress and professionalism (Zelizer, 2004; Kantola, 2016). This professional identity manifests itself in the widely-shared ideal of objectivity (Hanusch & Hanitzsch, 2017) according to which the professional journalist can rise above politics and curate the public debate to provide the reasonable public with unbiased knowledge (Jutel, 2016: 1133-1134).

In terms of public debate, the problem is that this critical mind-set easily turns into anti-political cynicism. When discussing politics of austerity, for example, journalists juxtapose the ideological and partisan nature of politics with the seemingly neutral and non-ideological nature of economic facts or the market. This “*realist style*” (Phelan, 2014: 87) of journalism renders austerity, despite the painful consequences, as simply the pragmatic thing to do. Austerity and reforms will modernise the economy and help to regain market confidence in public finances, thus serving the “*common good*” (idib., 106). Anti-austerity and anti-reform sentiments are, on the other hand, depicted as being irrational. They signal either a populist disavowal of the economic facts or a temptation to serve vested interests, groups whose sectional interests are threatened by the economic reforms and spending cuts (Harjuniemi, 2018). This tends to move issues of economic policy outside what Mouffe (2005) would call the “*political*”: debates on economic policy are waged in a post-political register, not as struggles between different politico-ideological projects but between the “*rational*” and “*irrational*” (Harjuniemi, 2018b).

4. The crisis of liberal democracy and the crisis of professional journalism

As stated at the beginning of this paper, the global financial crisis did not lead to any re-calibration in economic policy. In the U.S., the Trump administration, after gaining power with establishment-bashing populism, has continued to dis-

mantle what is left of the American welfare state. In Europe, the austerity policies adopted in 2010 plunged many of the peripheral European nations into a deep socio-economic crisis and the European Central Bank has emerged as the institution keeping the content intact.

However, the angst engendered by the crisis has delivered a severe blow to the legitimacy of the post-World War II liberal democratic order and of established political forces. Such turmoils as the Trump presidency, Brexit, and the rise of populist and authoritarian politics have destabilised the hegemony of globalisation and Third Way neoliberalism (Mouffe, 2018). This unravelling is clearly manifested in the exodus of voters from mainstream centre-left and centre-right parties. Indeed, this resurrection of political ideologies once deemed retrograde marks the end of a technocratic liberal order; an era of political consensus where substantial politico-ideological differences had ceased to exist and Enlightenment principles of scientific rationality could define the optimal approach to governance (Waisbord, 2018).

Importantly for us, it was in this context that Western professional journalism could flourish. Formally abandoning direct political affiliations during the late 19th and early 20th century (Kaplan, 2002; Conboy, 2004), professional journalism worked as the pedagogic branch of the liberal technocratic project (Jutel, 2013). It produced objective reporting via its professional practices rooted in scientific realism (Schudson, 1978; Zelizer, 2012; Kantola, 2016). Journalism walked “*closely to middle-of-the-road elite politics*” (Waisbord, 2018: 4) and sought its place in the hierarchical system of truth-building with scientific experts on top. Instead of being an open forum where a variety of different voices could be heard, 20th century journalists became the technical administrators of the public sphere, vetting and processing voices before they reached the mass public (Nerone, 1995: 51; Kaplan, 2010: 34–35).

These political and epistemic conditions are, however, in a state of flux. Rising economic polarisation, the return of radical politics, and a communication environment characterised by flows of counter-knowledge undermining expert knowledge weaken the foundations on which professional journalism once was able to thrive (Waisbord, 2018). In recent decades, these tendencies have been fuelled by the crisis of journalistic business models and by media policy approaches that have emphasised market-based solutions and deregulation, contributing to a distorted communication system exploited by far-right movements (Freedman, 2018; Pickard, 2018). As marked by a growing distrust towards news (Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, Levy, & Nielsen, 2018), it is getting increasingly difficult for journalists to speak to mass audiences in the name of the truth. Those most dissatisfied with mainstream journalism are turning to alternative or “fake news”

outlets that can monetise partisanship and anti-establishment grudges by producing identity-based content (Kreiss, 2018). The populist revolt and distrust of traditional forms of truth-telling together with an abundance of online content are, allegedly, adding up to an era of “post-truth”, an epistemic crisis that is in danger of eroding any base of shared reality and democratic discourse (Dahlgren, 2018).

These transformations, of course, create immense challenges for professional journalism. What is the role of journalists in an era of radical politics, when “*the anger at elites includes them*” (Zelizer, 2018: 152)? Relying on the core values of objectivity, facticity and rationality will hardly produce meaningful results. The promise to produce more facts and more truth will not restore journalism’s authority when the liberal values of reasoned public communication are being replaced by bursts of identity-based public expressions (Waisbord, 2018: 3-4). Indeed, the fact-checking habitus of professional journalism has become yet another marker of political tribalism and doubling-down on these virtues might lead to deepening divisions than to a reconciling mode of public communication (Anderson, 2018).

We need to start from the realisation that it is not the lack of professionalism or facts that is the problem. As the case of journalism and the economic crisis shows, the standard features of professional journalism—e.g. objectivity and established sourcing practices—should be considered as problematic *per se*. Journalism, instead of seeing the crisis as an opportunity to discuss the direction of post-crisis societies, has addressed the crisis in a typical manner, letting elites set the agenda and marginalising alternative political ideas. Journalism has thus contributed to a “post-democratic public sphere” where dominant ideas have been shielded from severe ideational challenges (Harjuniemi & Ampuja, 2018). It is no wonder the mediated austerity consensus, echoing the demands set by the economic and political class, has been out of touch with the material reality of the people living in, for example, de-industrialised parts of the U.S. or U.K. (Davis, 2018: 167).

Therefore, I argue that it is not surprising that journalism has been put in an uncomfortable position by such demagogues as Donald Trump who equate the press with enemies of the people (see Freedman, 2018). These concerns should not be arrogantly dismissed. On the contrary, journalism needs to critically assess its routines, practices and virtues. The lessons from the 2008 financial crisis provide us with some clues on how to start repair work and revitalise journalism’s democratic function. The renovations should cover the very foundations of the profession. The profession should rethink the use of sources—not to mention journalistic hiring practices—to create more diversity. An open mind towards politico-economic ideas that might go against consensual elite thought is also needed.

In short, addressing the limits of standard journalistic values is an essential part of any meaningful reform.

A more radical line of thought is, however, to question whether there is a viable future for professional, “above the fray”, journalism that has sought to be autonomous from partisan politics (see Waisbord, 2013). In an era marked by identity-based political communication, the unravelling of the centrist political consensus and a deterioration of traditional business models, we might have to rethink the relationship between journalism and politics. Should journalists and journalism scholars accept that the “unifying” (Muhlmann, 2008: 6) model of journalism—that can produce the objective truth acceptable to all—is not the end of journalism history? Perhaps we will witness a renaissance of politically active journalism; journalism that strengthens shared tribal identities and articulates common political goals and adversaries (see Curran, 1978; Kaplan, 2002).

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Biography

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