

Political Communication and the Realities of Democracy

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Palabras clave

“Politics”; “Communication”; “Democracy”; “Media”.

Sumario

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Abstract

This article argues that given the increasing polarisation, commercialisation and globalisation of the media, political communication is facing significant challenges in supporting and improving democratic practice in contemporary democracies. Furthermore new research on voters’ behaviour indicates that most voters are less interested and knowledgeable about politics than previously thought. These changes threaten to undermine

some of the foundations of democracy and the question is if political communication can contribute to improve our democracies. I argue that a focus on mutual advantage policies is one way to improve the democratic politics and political communication.

Cómo citar este texto:

Harald Borgebund (2019): Political Communication and the Realities of Democracy, in *Miguel Hernández Communication Journal*, nº10 (1), pp. 165 a 179. Universidad Miguel Hernández, UMH (Elche-Alicante). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21134/mhcyj.v10i0.290>

1. Introduction

Political communication is essential in a democratic polity. Nonetheless, a growing number of theoretical and empirical works are asking for a re-appraisal of democracy in a more realistic direction and challenge core assumptions of what political communication actually is (Shapiro: 2010 and Achen and Bartels: 2016). Proponents of realistic democratic theory have pointed out that the electorate often makes decisions based on flawed assumptions and that voters are unable to comprehend and process much of the political communication the electorate is exposed to. This raises an important question: can political communication be improved to further and improve democratic politics? In this article I aim to answer this question. The bifurcation between the ideals of democratic politics and the actual operation of democratic politics ultimately raises the question of how we understand democracy and what democracy ought to be. Political communication is the glue that binds the electorate and politicians together. Therefore, an analysis of the role of political communication in light of the criticism from realistic democratic theory is therefore an important element in attempting to revive democracy. I start the first section with a brief review of some important developments in the study of political communication and democratic theory. I then continue with a discussion of recent research on the realities of contemporary democracies. In the third and final section I bring the two first sections together by arguing that through mutual advantage politics it is possible to use political communication to somehow improve democratic politics.

2. The Changing Role of Political Communication

Political communication is as central to democracy as elections. Without exchange of information and political debate elections lose some of their significance. In democratic theory this is widely acknowledged and succinctly expressed by Robert Dahl who argued that ‘within reasonable limits as to time, each member [of the electorate] must have equal and effective opportunities for learning about relevant alternative policies and their likely consequences’ (Dahl: 1998: 37). Access to different points of view and the ability to express and participate in public debate are essential to make democracies vibrant and to legitimate democracy as a desirable form of government. Dahl asks for an enlightened public debate where the emphasis is on the review of opposing arguments rather than that the most powerful getting their way. Simultaneously with the social and economic changes in many Western societies over the last decades political communication has gone through significant changes too. Many of these changes makes Dahl’s ideal difficult to realise in actual democracies.

My analysis emphasise what I label contemporary democracies, which refer to those societies holding regular and free elections with universal suffrage. Various democracy indexes measure the number of such societies and the number is changing from one year to another. However, the core group of such societies typically include most of Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand and a number of Asian and African countries and most of these countries fall under the wide and elusive bracket ‘liberal democracy’ (Held: 2006). There are important differences between the media market in these societies as well as political differences. For my general discussion in this article those differences will be of less significance, but I will sometimes specify by referring to specific countries or regions. Furthermore, the term liberal democracy with its emphasis on representative democracy has been subject to critical scrutiny. I

will not go into details of this debate in this article, but it suffice to acknowledge that liberal democracy is a controversial term and some has argued that liberal democracy and representative democracy has been supplanted by ‘monitory democracy’ which are all the various commissions, review panels and other extra parliamentary committees structuring and overseeing the democratic process (Keane: 2009). Liberal democracy is nonetheless the dominant term and gives a frame of reference that most democratic theorists are familiar with. For this reason I will use the term liberal democracy in this article.

Before starting the analysis a note on method is necessary. In this article the main point is to analyse the relationship between media and democratic decision-making. When reflecting on this issue I have found it useful to rely on James Hyland’s view of political theory as integrating political practice and normative judgements (Hyland: 1995). I try to combine insights into how media influence political communication with normative perspectives on how democratic decision-making ought to be carried out. Political theory thus understood meets in the intersection between political practice and philosophical reflection. That is also the type of analysis attempted in this article.

In this section I will examine some of the most prominent changes in political communication and argue that as a consequence of these changes political communication must be re-examined and adapted to our changing circumstances. I will divide my discussion in two parts. Part one deal with how media impacts public debate. The second part will deal with social changes over the last decades that influenced the role of political communication. There are many possible ways the media can impact the political process and an analysis of these different approaches could itself be an independent study. To draw attention to some important structures and approaches my discussion will centre around four important (but not exhaustive) mechanisms drawn from Hague et al. (2016). Hague et al emphasise four different mechanisms for media influencing politics: reinforcement, agenda-setting, framing and priming (2016: 238-240). The main point for my discussion is not these mechanisms in themselves, but to use them as tools for analysing further the relationship between media and politics and linking them to important features of contemporary democracies. Many analyses of the relationship between media and democratic politics reach broadly the same conclusions and an example is James Curran’s excellent analysis of media and democracy (Curran: 2011). Hague et al. provides an analytical framework off the shelf that makes it ideal for the analysis in this article and my main focus will therefore be on Hague et al. to make the analysis as focused as possible.

I start with discussing the role of reinforcement in political communication before continuing with the role of agenda setting, framing and priming. The Reinforcement Thesis was a dominant perspective in the decades before television became a dominant media for political communication. Essentially the idea was that political views were transmitted through the family and that parents transmitted their political views to their children and that political communication ought to reinforce the political views and values to the various groups and social classes in society (Hague et al: 2016: 238). Effectively the Reinforcement Thesis argued that the transfer of political views within the family protected voters against attempts of changing people’s basic preferences through political communication. An example is the role of the party press the first

decades after WW2 in many Western countries. These papers spoke directly to the various party members and social groups it targeted. Thus, these publications aimed to reinforce the support for the party line more than persuading members from other groups.

Alternative views were available but the assumption was that voters were not interested in reading about alternative views. The public had equal and effective opportunities to learn about alternative policies as Dahl argued for, but was not interested in using the opportunity. Reinforcement was an expression of the widespread partisanship during the first decades after WW2. Partisanship ebbed as it gave way to commercialisation, fragmentation and globalisation from the 1970s and onwards. These changes will be discussed in more details below. Against this background, democratic theorists such as Carole Pateman and others developed theories about participatory democracy to counter the tendency towards fragmentation and polarisation (Pateman: 1970). Especially marginalised groups interests were neglected when commercialisation and fragmentation increased. Therefore, a natural development of participatory democracy led to the development of theories in support of representation of marginalised groups (Young: 1989) and a need to create stronger democracies instead of the thin liberal democracy currently prevailing (Barber: 1994). The critical assessment of the fragmentation and polarisation of liberal democracy is an on going debate and a debate that still is vibrant with a wide plethora of participants. What many of the contributors share is a desire to improve current democratic practice, which is also the aim of this article.

Agenda setting is a second role of political communication. The media is influencing what voters talk about and which issues are being discussed (Hague et al: 2016: 239). Media outlets make decisions every day about which issues to present. When taking these decisions the editors have their readers in mind and after the advent of social media and Internet, it is possible to monitor which issues are most read by readers. Readers impact which issues will be on the agenda as the editors are likely to choose issues that will generate more “clicks” and be read more widely than issues that will receive less attention. Agenda setting today takes place in a context of greater interaction than in the past. However, one may question the value of this type of interaction as emphasising clicks rather than the substance of the matter.

Thirdly, the media is framing how an issue is presented and which aspects of an issue should be emphasised (Hague et al: 2016: 240). Commercialisation of media is forcing editors to consider what is the most sellable and exciting angle of an issue. Only by presenting the most exciting angles of an issue can a media outlet ensure readers (customers) will continue to purchase their product. Agenda setting is a powerful tool for media outlets to try to influence the public in one direction or another. Especially for media outlets with owners pushing a specific political view. Here media faces a dilemma: on the one hand freedom of speech permit a wide diversity of views to be put forward in the public debate, on the other hand, sensational and conflict oriented presentations of groups and political issues may contribute to undermine civic traditions necessary for democracy to flourish. In Robert Putnam’s classic study of Italy he shows the great importance of civic traditions and how these traditions constitutes important glue in society and what can happen if these traditions are lacking (Putnam:

1994). Along the same vein, Arend Lijphart's iconic study of majority and consensus democracies underline the importance of civic traditions when it comes to creating flourishing democracies (Lijphart: 1999). Therefore, it rests a huge responsibility on the shoulders of editors and media outlets when it comes to how issues are framed in the public debate.

Finally priming can influence how an issue is interpreted during an election campaign or in the public debate more generally (Hague et al: 2016: 240). By emphasising certain issues and phrases a candidate or a media outlet can try to be associated with certain issues and certain views and thus give voters certain associations that might affect their political views over time. Voter's attention span is often short and difficult to capture due to many competing issues so by priming certain issues over time it is possible for voters to more easily recognise the political messages certain candidates want to present to the public.

Through these four mechanisms political communication is transmitted by politicians, media outlets and other agents aiming to influencing the public in one way or another. Furthermore, these four mechanisms points out both the strengths and weaknesses of the public debate in contemporary societies. Mass media is indispensable in contemporary democratic states. Most of the political communication is carried out through mass media, and television has for several decades been the most prominent medium. If politicians cannot capture the attention of editors and journalists it is difficult to engage their audience. Media holds great power over access to voters and politicians audience. Still, it is unclear to what extent voters can be persuaded by political communication. The reinforcement thesis is persuasive and although the party press has been waning for several decades recently polarisation has been increasing. Especially since the financial crises in 2008 polarisation has been on the rise in many democratic societies. These points show that political communication is subjugated to how mass media is operating and this point out the limits of equal and effective opportunities to learn about alternative policies as Dahl emphasised above. The structure of media makes public debate and political communication less ideal than what would be desirable from a democratic perspective. Hague et al connects these four mechanisms with how commercialisation, fragmentation, globalisation and Internet changed political communication and the public debate (Hague et al: 2016: 240-244). To complete the discussion of media's influence on politics I will briefly discuss these four social changes with media's influence.

Commercialisation of media has coincided with the decline of the party press and national broadcasting in many democracies (Hague et al: 2016: 240). The decline of the party press and public broadcasting has seen the influence of national parties being reduced and commercial media empires expand and gain influence. To the extent public broadcasting and the party press remain these outlets have also felt a need to become more commercial in their coverage of politics. Commercialisation may lead to focus on politics as entertainment rather than an enlightened public discourse. Popularisation may also lead to the audience experiencing their concerns are heard and given time in the public debate.

Fragmentation can be seen in the wide choice of different programs and news

outlet available (Hague et al: 2016: 241). Increasingly it is easy for the public to avoid outlets disagreeing with their views and to choose only those outlets confirming their views or reinforcing their views. Society as such is becoming increasingly diverse and pluralistic and the various media outlets are reflecting this trend by offering a wide range of programs and perspectives on politics. Fragmentation has the same consequence as commercialisation that it might reduce the possibility of being exposed for counterarguments and creating an enlightened public debate. An enlightened public debate seems increasingly elusive and difficult to realise in contemporary democracies. In the final section I aim to discuss this in more detail and suggest remedies that may improve the public debate.

Globalisation meant that news are disseminated to the entire world within minutes it happens and secondly that it is harder for state media and other actors to convince the population with propaganda. Access to internet makes it harder to conceal or twist information as the public can easily access news sources from other countries to check the fact worthiness of, for example, state propaganda or other who wants to portray an issue in a certain way. Consequently, these changes might indicate the beginning of a global public debate. The transmission of ideas and views reach a global audience. The rise of global sports and popular culture are underpinning these changes. Despite the constant exchange of ideas and use of the Internet and social media language is still a major obstacle to create a global public (Hague: et al: 2016: 242).

Finally, social media and the Internet give rise to the opportunity to engage the audience in unprecedented ways. Voters can contact politicians directly and politicians can contact their voters directly. Direct communication between voters and politicians has the advantage that the public debate is not filtered through editors and commercial channels (Hague et al: 2016: 243). Instead the electorate can address and criticise politicians uninterrupted and politicians can through trial and error find out what kind of communication that is most effective. Circumventing traditional communication channels may reinvigorate public debate and increase the public's interest in politics. Simultaneously with no editors or someone to monitor the public debate it might succumb to primarily reinforce existing beliefs (prejudices) without engaging in debate with alternative policies and points of views.

Taken together the methods of media and the changes seen in democratic societies amounts to great challenges for creating a public debate where the audience is presented with alternative policies and have to reflect on alternatives to their own views. In the world of social media reinforcement is primary and in the commercial media outlets views, clicks and market share is dominating. Politicians themselves have little incentive to further an enlightened public debate, as their primary goal is to transmit their political position and strengthen their position. Overall few of the actors have any incentive to prioritise the quality of the public debate and the quality of democracy. Media and public debate is crucial for democracy, but none of the institutions and actors within the system has much incentive to encourage the quality of the debate and the quality of democracy. Finally this points to a situation that seems difficult to change or improve as these incentives and structures are deeply embedded in to the structure of our societies. As will be clear from the next section is that when analysing the state of contemporary democracies the situation is even more dramatic.

3.he Realities of Contemporary Democracies

The state of media and political communication reflects the current state of democracy in many western states. When assessing the realities of many democracies the current situation is far from the ideals democratic theorists advocate and that are being thought essential to democratic decision-making such as equal political influence, enlightened public debates and an active citizenship and so on. The reality is instead marked by low rates of participation, polarisation and voters with poor abilities to make meaningful decisions. These traits have started to receive attention from researchers and a new understanding of democracy called ‘Realistic Democratic Theory’ has gradually emerged. This approach argues that many of the ideals embedded in democratic theory are elusive and that a different and less ideal approach must be taken to restore democracy. In this section I discuss three aspects related to a more realistic approach to understand democracies that builds on the aspects related to political communication discussed in the previous section. I start with a discussion of Daniel Kahneman’s work on decision-making. Secondly I discuss the low participation rates in many democratic societies. Finally, I discuss the role of polarisation and “tribalism” in democratic societies.

According to Daniel Kahneman the human brain process information and make decisions in two distinct ways: one fast and one slow. The fast way is intuitive and quick without much deliberation. The slow one is based on deliberations and taking into account the various arguments for and against the various options. As we have to make thousands of decisions every day we have to rely on the fast and intuitive way in order to cope with all the various decisions we have to make throughout the day. If we wanted to reflect and deliberate on every decision we have to make it would simply be impossible to get through the day. Without relying on fast and intuitive thinking we would be unable to respond to the constantly changing environment around us and to avoid approaching cars and so on. The problem is that we find ourselves in highly complex societies in which abstract thinking is necessary when making decisions. Consequently, human beings are not good at making statistical, financial and mathematical decisions (Kahneman: 2011). Unfortunately, modern life forces us to make such decisions constantly.

Here Kahneman’s relevance to politics becomes apparent. Many of the political decisions both politicians and voters are asked to make are statistical, financial or mathematical. According to Kahneman, when people are faced with such decisions a common strategy is to simplify the question and substitute the question for a simpler and easier question (Kahneman: 2011). For example, the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016 was about a highly complex issue with many considerations on both sides. However, comprehending this highly complex issue is difficult for most voters (or for anyone at all). As the public debate developed before the referendum instead of focusing on the various options and policy details a lot of the political communication emphasised instead immigration. The discussion was simplified by answering an easier question than the original question. Immigration is also a highly complex issue, but the political communication often appeals to emotions and the electorate’s values. The original Brexit question was substituted for an appeal to the electorate’s emotions and values concerning immigration. By simplifying we can use the fast and intuitive

decision-making process and reach a conclusion without extensive deliberation and analysis. Kahneman calls this strategy ‘answering a simpler question’ (2011: 97).

In political communication the strategy of simplifying the original question and substitute it for a simpler one is a common strategy used for priming and to reinforce a political message to the electorate. Such simplifications are reducing complex issues to overly simple questions and instead of enlightening the public the public is deceived to think they answer the original question. Part of democracy’s appeal is that it makes acceptable decisions, but if the political communication systematically is simplified to the detriment of the quality of the decisions one might also question the legitimacy of democracy in the end.

In contemporary democracies only a small proportion of the population is political active. Just 5-7% of the population are participating beyond voting (Milbraith and Goel: 1977). Even voting in general elections are declining. Voter participation in general elections in many contemporary democracies ranges between 60-80% and is on a downward trend. A large part of the electorate is apathetic to politics 30-35% (Milbraith and Goel: 1977). These numbers can be interpreted in different ways. It might be considered as a democratic crisis that voting in general elections is going down and that only a few percentage of the population is participating in politics beyond voting. Furthermore, that about one third of the population is apathetic to politics altogether undermine the legitimacy of democracy. From the perspective of political communication it seems that a large part of the electorate is beyond reach and does not engage or respond to political communication.

One might argue that is to exaggerate the problems with participation in contemporary democracies. A large part of the electorate vote in general elections and pay attention to at least part of the on going political debate in their community. Moreover, most voters live busy lives and are engaged in a wide range of activities such as their families, associations, cultural activities and many other activities. Thus, many voters time for participating in politics is limited. Therefore politics becomes an activity for those who see politics as a vocation (Weber: 2004). Politics require some genuine interest and expecting everyone to engage beyond voting might be too demanding and be counterproductive if voters feel pressured into active politics. Regardless of whether one think low participation rates are signs of a democratic crisis or acceptable and an expression of people choosing other activities this situation has implications for political communication with the electorate. It means that parts of the electorate might be difficult to reach and not worth to try to engage with. It also means that it might be necessary to differentiate the messages to the devoted group of active political participants and the large group merely voting in elections.

A third important feature with the electorate in contemporary democracies is the high level of tribalism and polarisation. Tribalism and polarisation are expressions of voter’s social identities being used to reinforce their political allegiances. Some research suggest that voters ‘typically make choices not on the basis of policy preferences or ideology, but on the basis of who they are-their social identities’ (Achen and Bartels: 2016), and label this for ‘the group theory of democracy’ and view ‘citizens first and foremost as members of social groups, with (no doubt numerous and

complex) social identities and group attachments figuring crucially in their political loyalties and behavior' (2016: 16, original emphasis). Their conclusion is that any theory of democracy 'must be built, not on the French Enlightenment, on British liberalism, or on American Progressivism, with their devotion to human rationality and monadic individualism, but instead on the insights of the critics of these traditions, who recognized that human life is group life' (Achen and Bartels: 2016: 17).

Taken together these aspects of contemporary democracies presented above pose difficulties for the role of political communication. If political communication emphasise reinforcement and framing the political communication is contributing to answering a simpler question and reiterating the impression of tribalism in contemporary politics. Furthermore the dynamics of commercial media contribute in the same direction. Thus, the role of political communication can potentially undermine more than improve the public discourse on politics. Political communication is essential in making democracy function adequately and arguably almost as essential as elections. Therefore, if the political communication is undermining the democratic process then it poses a serious problem for contemporary democracies. This asks for a reconsideration of the role political communication play in contemporary democracies. In the next section I will briefly address these concerns and suggest some ways that may improve the public discourse on politics.

4. The Beauty of Mutual Advantage

So far the analysis has pointed out several reasons why current practices of political communication are problematic in many contemporary democracies. The changes in the field of political communication over the last decades and the emphasis on a more realistic understanding of how actual democracies operate based on psychology and new research about voter behaviour demonstrates that the state of democracy and political communication is dysfunctional. The problem pointed out in the previous sections is that the changes seen in the media market in contemporary democracies are difficult to reverse. Furthermore, the general point is that given human nature and the dysfunctional state of human societies there will always be a need to have safeguards to protect democratic institutions. Requiring too much from institutions and human nature is futile and will only be counterproductive. The alternative is to acknowledge the shortcomings of human nature and human society and implement institutions to counteract these shortcomings. The history of political theory is full of proposals to overcome these shortcomings. Just think of the Federalist Papers, Machiavelli's discussion of the Roman republic, Hobbes, Locke and a wide range of other political theorists from antiquity until contemporary democratic theories.

Nonetheless, in recent democratic theory a more ideal approach has been popular. Many democratic theorists have suggested that the problems with democratic politics can be solved by increased deliberation (Cohen and Rogers: 1983, Dryzek: 1996 and 2000, Gutmann and Thompson: 1996). However, democratic deliberation will require more attention and participation from the electorate and the problem is that it will be difficult to convince a large part of the electorate to participate in democratic deliberations. Given the low numbers of participation in contemporary democracies it seems difficult to expect voters will turn up voluntarily for meetings to deliberate. In addition, deliberations might not increase the quality of the decisions made by

democratic assemblies. As the discussion of Kahneman suggested difficult questions are sometimes transformed into simpler questions and means that we end up answering a different question from the question we are supposed to answer.

What I want to draw attention to is a subtle mechanism that is often overlooked and that I believe can contribute to improving the quality of the workings of democratic decision-making. The idea is simply that to make democracy work it is necessary with an experience or perception of mutual advantage among the politically most effective groups in a society (Hardin: 1999). Mutual advantage has several advantages that can contribute to stable and relatively well functioning democracies. Firstly, it means that all parties have an interest in sustaining the democratic process. Secondly, it means that there is a willingness to accept compromises between the politically effective groups in a society. Thirdly, it means that the system is somewhat stable. A perception of mutual advantage can temper some of the divisiveness in contemporary democracies by encouraging a less combative public discourse and making it less necessary for media to appeal to relatively simplistic communication strategies such as reinforcement and framing.

The idea of mutual advantage has a long history going back at least to Thomas Hobbes and has been an important strain of thinking within liberalism. Mutual advantage makes both (or all) parties better off by finding political solutions that all can approve of in some way or another. Here a political solution does not mean to be agreement or compromise on a specific policy. What is necessary is merely a consensus on an understanding that all the major political interests in society are better off with a democratic political system. Various political groups may fight intensely over the merits of a specific policy, but accept that the democratic system is the best framework for public decision-making.

Mutual advantage moves society in the direction of a kinder and gentler society. Stephen Pinker (2011) attributes mutual advantage as the reason why contemporary democracies are less violent today than in the past. Realising that mutual advantage benefit all (or most) involved moves social interaction away from zero sum games to social interaction where gains are made and ultimately reason and reasonableness are advanced. Here it becomes apparent how mutual advantage is relevant to political communication and the public discourse in contemporary democracies. If mutual advantage is the dominant modus operandi mutual advantage is likely to spill over in to the public discourse and political communication. In the long run reason and reasonableness is likely to win out in the public discourse and political communication.

This might sound too easy or too good to be true. I believe that is not the case, but the difficulty lies in creating the conditions for mutual advantage to flourish. Democracy, constitutionalism and liberalism 'works when and only when it serves to coordinate a population on some matters, such as order, commerce, and national defence, that are more important than the issues on which they differ' (Hardin: 1999: 1). Society must be bound together by some issues that override the temptation to pursue pure self-interest.

In contemporary democracies economic growth can coordinate the population and

create mutually advantageous schemes. Since the Industrial Revolution and onwards, contemporary democracies have experienced periods of strong economic growth and economic growth has been important in raising people's living standards by increasing most people's buying power. Increases in productivity and economic growth has gone hand in hand and created the current consumer oriented culture in contemporary democracies (for better or for worse). That being said it is necessary to acknowledge the many economic downturns and periods of high unemployment rates and stagnating living standards. Nonetheless, despite the suffering the many boom and bust cycles have led to over the long run economic growth and productivity gains have led to increases in living standards and more prosperous societies.

An economic order offering mutual gains to both employers and employees is an example of a mutually advantageous order that can coordinate the politically effective groups in society. The strength of such an arrangement is that it sets the stage for a political order where compromise and possibly a more enlightened political discourse not only defined by reinforcement, agenda-setting, priming and framing, but instead also recognising the merits of the various interests rather than just portraying politics in a combative way. Recognising the mutual dependency and the gains from mutual advantage will not remove the conflict side of politics but can contribute to promote compromises and a slightly softer public debate.

For all the potential of mutual advantage on an economically advantageous order the obvious drawback is that the mutually advantageous situation might easily break down during periods of recessions and weak growth in productivity. There is no way of escaping the possibility of this consequence apart from promoting policies supporting economic growth. However, even promoting economic growth is unlikely to avoid periods of low or no economic growth. Under such circumstances mutual advantage schemes may break down. A break down is not inevitable under such circumstances but a possibility. The description of mutual advantage in this paper is perhaps an idealised version of how politics can function in contemporary democracies. That is also the intention. I want to present here a model that can somehow improve the current context for democracies and political communication and at the same time be based on various groups self-interest and realism concerning motivation and participation. Mutual advantage is unlikely to be a silver bullet solving all problems concerning political communication in contemporary democracies. What I do want to argue in favour of is that mutual advantage is a necessary condition for a reasonably well-functioning democracy. Furthermore, mutual advantage has the advantage that its starting point is the actor's self-interest. As long as the actors self-interest is served the system can be enforced by the various actors and require relatively little enforcement. Finally, mutual advantage is a long-term strategy and the results are seen over the long run and not from one year to another.

A second potential problem with mutual advantage is the emphasis on the 'politically effective' groups. Essentially this means that for mutual advantage democracy to work it is sufficient for the dominating groups in society to experience mutual advantage. Thus, mutual advantage may ignore marginalised and smaller social groups. Ultimately this may mean continuing marginalisation of minority groups. Proponents of radical democracy challenge this feature with mutual advantage theory and argue that such

a conception of democracy is oppressing differences (Laclau and Mouffe: 1985). Unfortunately for mutual advantage theory the critics are largely right. Marginalisation may be the price to pay for mutual advantage. As long as a working majority/consensus on the foundations of the democratic system exist it might involve that the interests of minority groups are less prominent. Liberal democracy grants fundamental individual rights to all citizens and mutual advantage will not involve violations for minority groups' rights. Instead what one might see is that the public policies will reflect the interest of the politically effective groups to a larger extent than the minority groups. That does not amount to oppression but a strong bias in favour of the majority groups. Moving beyond mutual advantage is difficult because of the tribalism among the electorate and even if it would be a noble ideal to work towards I believe that mutual advantage is as good as democracy can be given the constraints on human nature discussed in the previous section. To many that is a disappointing conclusion, but nonetheless it is better with a modest and somewhat working democracy than expecting the impossible and setting the bar too high. Therefore, even if radical democrats are right in principle it is difficult to see the merits of their claims when taking human nature as understood in this article into account.

Mutual advantage and a realistic approach to political communication are meant to show what is possible given the motivation and actual behaviour of the electorate. Although mutual advantage can contribute to pushing the public discourse on politics in a kinder and gentler direction by raising the awareness of the view of ones opponents it is not a quick fix. Political discourse is bound to also emphasise conflict of interest, be combative, use reinforcement, agenda-setting, priming and framing. These techniques relevance can in part be explained by the realistic approach to democracy. Given the electorate's difficulty with comprehending complex questions, the primacy of groups and low participation rates these techniques are bound to play an important role and although sometimes in conflict with the ideals of democracy such techniques are inevitable. Mutual advantage shows us how far it is realistic for democracy to move in the direction of becoming kinder and gentler. It might be disappointing for someone that the advances promised by mutual advantage are quite modest and to some extent merely a justification of the current status. Although I agree that the advances are modest, I believe modest but sustainable advances are better than unrealistic and ambitious schemes.

5. Conclusion

I started this paper with a discussion of various techniques or roles the media play in contemporary democracies: reinforcement, agenda-setting, framing and priming were discussed as the primary roles of the media. I then moved on to discuss the difficulties the electorate is facing when deciding on complex political issues. Furthermore I discussed the role of group identity in contemporary democracies and finally the low participation rates in many contemporary democracies. In the third and final section I argued that emphasising mutual advantage is one way to improve democracy and move the public debate in a kinder and gentler direction and nonetheless a more realistic direction taking into account the predicaments of contemporary democracies. For many this solution might not appear attractive, but making small steps in the right direction might trump unrealistic and demanding schemes in the long run.

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Cómo citar este texto:

Harald Borgebund (2019): Political Communication and the Realities of Democracy, in *Miguel Hernández Communication Journal*, nº10 (1), pp. 165 a 179. Universidad Miguel Hernández, UMH (Elche-Alicante). DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21134/mhcj.v10i0.290>