



# Labour, Education & Society

32

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(eds.)

## E-Political Socialization, the Press and Politics

The Media and Government in the USA,  
Europe and China

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### *The Editors*

Our lives increasingly are played out in an electronic world. The most recent Kaiser Family Foundation study of youth in America shows that the average amount of time spent with media is 10 hours and 45 minutes. This total includes multitasking (e.g., using more than one medium at a time). If one adds texting, the figure jumps to 12 hours and 20 minutes. That is more time than is spent sleeping, eating, and non-media school and face-to-face family-peer socializing. The 10 hours and 45 minutes represent an increase of 3 hours and 16 minutes more than was found in the initial Kaiser study conducted in 1999. Between 2004 and 2009, iPod/MP3 player use went from 18% to 76%. Cell phone use went from 39% to 66%. We are moving toward life in a virtual non-face-to-face electronic world. Immediate implications can be seen in the Kaiser Family Foundation study. Heavy media users get poorer grades in school and, relevant to the socio-political world, are more likely to get into a lot of trouble. Minorities (blacks, and Hispanics) are more likely to be exposed to media; consequently, there is a digital divide. Print consumption, included in the overall figure, has declined while TV content has increased along with music/audio, computer, video games, and movies (Rideout, et al., 2010, pp. 2, 4, 10, 28; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010, pp. 1-3).

Moreover, studies show that adults are moving in the same direction (German and Lally, 2007, pp. 338-339). Studies show that while adults are using the Internet and other computer related media, their TV consumption has also increased. What implications do these developments have for politics? Worries that virtual world consumption would result in lowered political involvement have not been borne out since voter turnout increased in the 2004 and 2008 US Presidential elections.

The nature of our news consumption has changed possibly for the worse. As newsprint declines and access to news moves online, the type of news we consume has changed. In a quality newspaper (such as *The New York Times* or *Le Monde*), editors/journalists select what goes on the front page and gets more public attention. On the computer, the top stories are not picked by professional media gatekeepers, but by an algorithm process which quantifies the number of hits each news item receives and moves the most frequently hit items to the top. In a sense, this process (e.g., employed by Google) democratizes the news by giving the general public control over topics that move to the top. But is this majority-based selection method the best way to decide what news is most important?

Majority rule without minority rights might be perceived as majority dictatorship. This is an outcome that democratic societies prevent by using all kinds of checks and balances. Letting the public move news stories to the top might just be the wrong way to determine what really is significant. Furthermore, the news

popup (which appears when one clicks on a news item) is a very brief one-page summary, complete with advertising and other items. This is what people like. Those who run Google have found that it is what the public wants. It's the news people want to access, not necessarily the news they need to be informed about as citizens. This gets to one of the conundrums of democracy which solves the problem of anything-goes majority rule with minority rights protection or any kind of sage input. And what about the preferred lack of depth?

This book examines the state of print and electronic media in the US, Europe, and China. The latest media developments, such as those mentioned previously, demonstrate that we are living in an increasingly media-centric world. The chapters included here represent theoretical and empirical studies that shed light on the meaning of this development. The trajectory of people's move to electronic communication is a global phenomenon affecting people's daily life throughout the world. Does this development aid or impede democracy? Is there an emerging "digital divide" contributing to an increasing gap between the rich and poor nations?

This book is divided into four parts that explore the various aspects of political socialization and its relationship with various media: Part 1 – Political Socialization Background (chapters 2 through 4); Part 2 – Media Use, Government, and Websites (chapters 5 through 8); Part 3 – The Print Press, Broadcasting, and Politics (chapters 9 through 12); and Part 4 – Critiques of the Emerging Virtual/Media World (chapters 13 through 17).

In Chapter 2, Daniel German looks at the basics of the political socialization process. Media, an agent of socialization, seems to edge out the traditional major socialization agency: the family. The trajectory of more media influence in the formation of our orientations toward society, government, community, and relations with other people are carefully monitored to ensure that we do not move in an unwanted direction, such as the destruction of democracy and/or positive social relationships. Inevitably, there is a lag between technology and the study of its effects, so the effort to chart these interrelationships is never finished. Technological change is not new. Witness the effects of the Gutenberg press and radio on communication. The history of communication technology is a steady increase of print and now electronic transmissions in our lives.

In Chapter 3, Heinz Sünker examines the influence of peer groups on the political socialization of youth. Traditional theories provided a pessimistic outlook for the future of successful political socialization. However, more recent explorations into youth and peer culture provide more hope for the future.

Chapter 4 examines the fundamental assumptions and criticisms from US reconceptualists and their current relevance. Some US critical theorists changed from a Marxist viewpoint to one of social democratic liberalism, with an emphasis on democratic, non-revolutionary reform. In this chapter, Russell Farnen focuses on the need for core processes that emphasize problem solving, decision making,

policy analysis, and basic subject matter which discusses political theory, ideology, and systems that help students to both handle and explain their political worlds, regardless of country of origin. This chapter finds political and cognitive sciences, problem solving, socialization, and political education research to be both complementary and mutually reinforcing. American concerns focus on the overly complex nature of such interrelationships, but such studies are mutually productive and useful for future progress in the field.

In Chapter 5, Daniel German and Caitlin Lally document media use among children and adults to show that we are simultaneously moving from less print consumption to more electronic use (including more television, along with a dramatic increase in computer-related activities). In the wake of this development, a digital race-based and socio-economic divide appears to be emerging. Access to information, the computer's promise of democratization, seems to be unequal. They ask, "Does living in a digital world result in a decline in social capital (face-to-face social mobilization)?" Perhaps we are losing ground in associational activities traditionally fundamental to democracy. Whether or not this is a reality seems to be mitigated by the relative salience of political issues which may or may not drive political involvement. In the face of more electronic media use, voter turnout increased in the US 2004 and 2008 elections. We will need to monitor this potential loss of social capital to determine whether or not this is a false conjecture.

In Chapter 6, Christ'l De Landtsheer assesses the quality of political websites. She examines party and public administration websites, personal websites for political leaders and administrators, and websites of non-governmental social and political organizations. By employing a coding scheme, De Landtsheer measures the "participation friendliness" of these websites and offers suggestions for building a qualitatively good political site.

In Chapter 7, Christ'l De Landtsheer, Natalya Krasnoboka, and Conny Neuner created an instrument to empirically evaluate websites. This survey instrument is a multifaceted methodology for measuring government websites, but it could easily be employed to examine private business websites as well. The authors examined websites in seven European nations and determined that the Netherlands has the most overall participation-friendly site and Poland the least friendly. Their scheme judges the transmission of information, the ease of interactivity, user friendliness (including links, search, and help functions), and site aesthetics. As more and more people enter the virtual world, governments should be interested in creating the most useable sites possible to better serve their citizens and create a more effective government.

Chapter 8 looks at how the Internet reinforces the incumbent political powers. In an empirical experiment, Henk Dekker and Arie in 't Veld demonstrate that instead of giving more groups access to people through websites, organizations with more money are able to create better websites that hold the interest of users.

Consequently, the already powerful and financially well-heeled organizations gain access to the voter's minds while the less fortunate drop out of sight.

Metaphors abound in press coverage of politics and politicians, who attempt to "frame" these metaphors to their advantage. For example, a press story might state that an administration has been hit by a "hurricane" and an administration official may state that we have weathered the hurricane and are returning to normal. The metaphorical frame gives the consumer a sense that things are not right or a perception that all is OK. In Chapter 9, Christ'l De Landtsheer and Elisabeth Koch suggest that Euroland nations' press used positive metaphors (e.g., emotively and persuasively optimistic) to bolster public support for adopting the Euro currency. In comparison, non-Euroland nations' press was relatively devoid of metaphors. A frame sets the stage for a positive, neutral, or negative view of a political issue and may influence its fate.

In Chapter 10, Marianne Law, Jerry Palmer, and David Middleton show how the United Kingdom press gave a more negative frame to adopting the Euro. This negative frame may have influenced public opinion against joining Euroland.

In Chapter 11, Natalya Krasnoboka and Christ'l De Landtsheer show how traditional media use relatively few metaphors in a crisis. In comparison, the newer online media use metaphors in more abundance in support of a revolutionary mood.

In Chapter 12, Vitaly Konzhukov shows how the Russian government ended the democratization period of print and electronic press following the end of the Soviet Union. The new Russian government resorted to economic deprivation, censorship, and "trumped up" criminal prosecutions to reign in newly developed print and broadcast (radio and television) media.

Several studies cast doubt on the idea of the media's contributions to democracy. In Chapter 13, Russell Farnen notes that terrorists and media are like a "horse and carriage." Writing before 9/11, Farnen states that our response to terrorism (which uses the media to convey its messages) mostly is violent. Our response to 9/11 was three wars: one in Afghanistan, another in Iraq, and a final "War on Terrorism" at home in the US and worldwide. He advocates a less violent response that looks at the causes of the terrorist act and examines ways to deal with the underlying problem without resorting to warfare.

In Chapter 14, Andy Koch argues that the Internet's virtual world should not be a substitute for real-world involvement in politics. Contrary to providing a more democratic avenue for involvement in politics, virtual politics might have the opposite effect by making people lose interest in direct involvement.

In Chapter 15, Mary Hepburn is concerned that television - now combined with the Internet - creates a seductive electronic world. This electronic world encourages people to spend their time there. Hepburn finds this enchantment with the electronic world discourages people from getting involved in the real world of politics. Certainly, this development merits a very careful assessment, which is a primary mission of this book.

In Chapter 16, Daniel German and Dragan Stefanovic question the whole notion of electronic media's dampening political involvement based on the rise of voter turnout in America's 2004 and 2008 elections. Issues played a central role in this increased involvement. They theorize that the salience of issues may move participation up and down and not necessarily the lack of face-to-face relationships. This whole argument may not settle the question since US voter turnout in 2004 and 2008 may have been even greater than it was, being lowered by television and the Internet.

In Chapter 17, Yingfa Song and Hongna Miao examine the influence of the Internet on China's government. The increased use of the Internet has heightened citizens' interest in and capacity for political participation. While breaking down the traditional pyramid structure of Chinese society, the Internet has also formed a new bureaucracy and a widening digital gap. China's quest for cyber democracy is hampered by this digital gap as well as the government's strict control of the Internet's content.

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