

Book Review

Boguslawa Dobek-Ostrowska & Jan Garlicki (eds.)
Political Communication in the Era of New Technologies
Frankfurt am Main, Germany: Peter Lang, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

I worked as a volunteer in a political election campaign for the first time in 1965. I had already had some experience using the silkscreen method to produce road signs in the Traffic Engineering Department in my local municipality where I painted fire hydrants on pleasant days but worked in the sign shop when the weather was especially inclement. In those days, aspirant elected officials were pretty much restricted to spreading their message by: placing colourful signs at traffic intersections, in store windows and on the lawns of willing supporters; appearing in person at staged community events and debates with other candidates; distributing brochures and knocking on people's doors hoping to encourage support in brief conversations; and currying favour with the local press. All those methods are still employed, but a multi-layered process has been added. We now see politicians engage citizens using the social media. From YouTube videos to Internet postings and from annoying and unsolicited emails to even more annoying and unsolicited "robocalls," potential leaders try everything from the dissemination of slogans and unflattering images of their opponents to capture our votes and to win our financial contributions to their campaigns.

The methods used by politicians, of course, only amount to a portion of the wider influence of communications technology and the stealthy intrusion of data collection, analysis, storage and retrieval into our public lives. The thoughts and habits of voters are monitored in the "cloud" and political activities are crowd-funded. Barack Obama managed to finance two presidential campaigns by raising \$1.4 billion from small donors using the Internet. Demonstrators from Tunis to Tehran to Tokyo to Toronto have brought tens of thousands to protest political tyranny and economic corruption by posting messages on social media. And, of course, elections themselves are increasingly being conducted electronically as people cast votes online.

The biggest job in the world will be espionage. Around the world, people are spending more and more of their time watching the other guy. Espionage at the speed of light will become the biggest business in the world. But the CIA and the FBI are really old hat using old hardware by comparison to what's coming ...

- Marshall McLuhan, 1972

What this portends is anybody's guess. Some see the current trends as just one more step toward a kind of inverted totalitarianism in which nefarious agencies of the state will be able to collect data—often in freely posted opinions in the social media and

blogs—on individual citizens as grounds for literally or figuratively deploying the “thought police.” Others imagine that it opens up a whole new scenario for direct democracy as electronic plebiscites and recall petitions for errant representatives can be conducted with no more effort than a few strokes on a keyboard. Technology can therefore be seen as an instrument to degrade or to enhance democratic practices.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise in this most surprising of times that new technologies are profoundly affecting political communication. Politics, after all, is just one element in our complex lives and technology is insinuating itself into all of them.

Not only are we relentlessly inundated with a spate of new consumer products which probably shouldn’t be mentioned by brand name since they’ll likely be obsolete before this is printed or, perhaps more accurately, “pixelized,” but revolutionary technologies have *already* gone far beyond what was contemplated a scant decade or two ago when personal computers were introduced and soon afterward were accompanied and complemented by the invention of the “world-wide-web.” The web, in turn, almost immediately spawned utopian/dystopian applications including online commerce, music and film downloading and an arresting array of surveillance options adequate to the (un)expressed needs and desires of espionage agents, secret police forces, tax collectors, insurance companies and dystopian fantasists of all kinds.

If it can be done, it must be done, and therefore it will be done.

George Grant, 1965.

We are now promised that soon we will have almost all the books in the world uploaded to virtual libraries where, we should understand, there will also be a tremendous temptation for the more pathological authorities to push the “delete” key and set civilization back more dramatically than the consumption by fire of all the scrolls in Alexandria.

Oh, and did I mention the likelihood that GPS chips will be installed in baby’s skulls immediately *post-partem* and that links will be made between infants and computers which will “literally” give them encyclopedic knowledge and an entire lifetime of recombinant memories (regardless of their capacity to learn on their own and without the messy need to have actual “experiences”). These data inserts will, of course, provide young children with all they will need to negotiate puberty, early adulthood and middle age just moments after they are born; as for old age, that may be eliminated completely—one way or another. People are, I should add, already working on cyborgs (jet-assisted cargo-carrying birds) and other impressive prostheses for the transhuman condition.

Well, perhaps that’s a trifle excessive. But, considering what’s happened in the past few years, it is not beyond the boundaries of imagination and therefore arguably not beyond the limits of implementation. Still, just as I was just getting over my annoyance at

The successor to politics will be propaganda, not in the sense of a message or ideology, but the impact of the whole technology of the times. So politics will eventually be replaced by imagery. The politician will be only too happy to abdicate in favour of his image, because the image will be so much more powerful than he could ever be.

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- Marshall McLuhan, 1972

the intrusion of political campaign robocalls, I learned that the social media are now the principal means of recruiting young men and women in Europe and North America for the *jihadist* group currently known as ISIL or the Islamic State. So, regardless of any paranoid futurist fantasies, I may actually be ever so slightly behind the times, out of my depth and perhaps beside myself when it comes to dealing with the immediate and imminent topics discussed in this thoroughly praiseworthy collection.

In *Political Communication in the Era of New Technologies*, Boguslawa Dobek-Ostrowska and Jan Garlicki and their contributors deal with these and other issues pertinent to my personal interest in democratic innovation. Their commentaries and conclusions, I am pleased to report, are not simple and they are certainly as simplistic as both devotees and detractors of the ubiquitous new technologies comfortably assert.

The editors themselves are admirable, innovative and well-published academics. Dobek-Ostrowska is Professor of Communication and Media at the University of Wroclaw and founder and president of the Polish Communications Association. Garlicki is Head of the Department of Sociology and Psychology of Politics at the Institute of Political Science at the University of Warsaw.

Political Communication in the Era of New Technologies is a collection of fifteen important essays and is divided into four main parts focusing on the Internet, the Social Media, the New Media in Election Campaigns and a fascinating section which explores the connection and continuities with traditional media. The range of the work is geographically vast. Issues of relevance are explored from the United States of America to Zimbabwe and from Germany to Mexico. Still, there is a main focus on Europe with excellent chapters on the media in Scotland, Germany, Romania, Slovakia and Poland.

The quality of the articles is uniformly high and particularly welcome in light not only of the seriousness of the questions they address, but also because of the healthy combination of theoretical significance and empirical validity. The authors, whether discussing “social media, entertainment and politics in the US,” exploring a decade (1999-2009) of “tradition and innovation” in German electoral campaigns for the European Parliament, “populist candidates and social media marketing in Poland in 2009 or “billboards in municipal elections in Slovakia” manage to maintain the difficult balance between a specific focus on particular cases and attentiveness to the larger implications of the subject under discussion. So, people with an interest in the nations under scrutiny will be able to learn something of importance about the country-specific issue and people interested in the larger theme will be afforded a useful example of the topic in practice.

Dobek-Ostrowska and Garlicki's contributors also do a fine job of balancing theory and empirical methodology. That is to say that their essays are about themes of overarching importance to politics and governance, but they do not indulge in speculative enterprises; their studies are methodologically rigorous and provide vital data that is appropriately interpreted according to the best available standards of social science.

I was particularly impressed with the editors' exploration of "the impact of new technologies on political communication" which considered "Western patterns and the case of Poland, Barbara Pfetsch and Silke Adam's exploration of the "democratic potentials of online communications in political debate" and Tendai Chari's sober assessment of "online news media and the limits of the alternative public sphere in Zimbabwe.

A great deal has been said in editorial and scholarly space about the alleged "democratic deficit" that is said to plague longstanding liberal democracies. A great deal has been conjectured about the degree to which the new media are a potential corrective to that deficit or, in the alternative, the extent to which electronic communications devices are complicit in the reduction of the public domain.

These salient questions are, of course, often buried in the hyperbole that almost defines our frenetic talk about life and lifelessness in the multi-patterned and multi-layered "global village." Books like *Political Communication in the Era of New Technologies* help to bring us down to Earth and allow us to be better grounded in the world as it is (or at least seems to be), which is the best we can expect as we contemplate the world as it is becoming (or we fear/hope it will become).

Dobek-Ostrowska and Garlicki's anthology is the first in what is promised to be a series of books under the general title "Studies in Communication and Politics." If the initial volume is a guide to this particular future, we may await additional contributions with high expectations.

Reference

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