

# Deliberation and the Media: Perspective on the role and possibility of the media in deliberative democracy

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## Abstract

This article challenges to seek for the role and possibility of the media in an idea of deliberative democracy. In so doing, the author first describes some literature reviews on the media and democracy on the whole, especially on deliberation and the media. To discuss a perspective on democracy and the media, some empirical data on people's satisfaction with democracy and the media in Canada are used in the paper.

The quantitative data prove rather cynical reaction toward the media by the general public and it leaves a question how the situation might be changed in an idea of deliberative democracy. As some scholars are giving hope to it, can deliberative democracy be the next option to improve what we have, democracy, which is considered as an ideal? Then, what will be the position and the role of the media to play?

## Introduction

The question of the level of satisfaction toward democracy evaluated by people has been always a great task to answer. There isn't one clear answer to this question even if there are a number of both quantitative and qualitative analyses on this subject. In analyzing how people evaluate democracy, there must be several aspects of it in order to deepen the analysis. It might be argued with political institutional analysis or more personal/individual level of discussion. Within those frameworks, there are various indicators that could answer the question.

Considering perspectives or aspects in terms of democracy, that an idea called "deliberative democracy" has emerged is somehow significant. It can be said that scholars who set their hopes to deliberative democracy believe that deliberation and public sphere could be the savior of the present situation in democracy. In other words, deliberative democracy is an approximated ideal model of democracy<sup>1</sup> and it is more practical rather than being just an ideal. There exists difference in degree in understanding what deliberative democracy really means, however, it is safe to state that they claim that the public sphere is where people simply get together and this is the only place that the

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1 Joohan Kim, "Communication, reason, and deliberative democracy," *Journal of Communication*, (Spring 1999), Vol. 49, No. 2, p.137.

real deliberation takes place. Then, what plays important role here in terms of people acquiring information so as to discuss issues when they encounter deliberation. Before judging if it is right or not, well-known knowledge can be what the media do in our daily life.

That is why, in 'democracy' today, the role of the media is no longer the aspect to be ignored or avoided in terms of understanding/analyzing how democracy works for people. It is clear that both ordinal citizens and political elites utilize the media in acquiring information that they need. George Bush once stated that he learned much more from the CNN than from the CIA when he was dealing with the Gulf War in the early 1990s. Thanks to the fast growing technology, especially satellite technology, we are now surrounded by 'live' pictures from all around the world.

In political perspective, it is not difficult to see the 'wag-the-dog' effect between politicians and the media, especially during the election campaigns. Analyzing the media and problems of how the media function can be another grand research. This project, however, challenges to analyze whether or not there is significant relationship between people's satisfaction level with democracy and several independent variables on the media. Upon the empirical data, the paper will eventually consider the role and the possibility of the media in deliberative democracy. The hypothesis could be people who are keener to the news and try to acquire information could be more cynical about the government or political institutions. Therefore, those people eventually obtain more negative perspective toward democracy. In so doing, the first part of the paper will deal with literature review on this subject. The rest of it will be some empirical model and also the testing of hypothesis.

## **Literature Review**

There are extensively numbers of studies done on the subject of the media. They can be found in the area of media studies, communication studies, political communication, sociology, anthropology (especially linguistically analyzed discourse) as well as political science. It could be totally another issue to discuss the media always with democracy, however, it is not over saying that major studies on the media, either studies weighed more on agenda-setting or on political dynamics of it, are somehow connected or underestimated with the conception of democracy. Theories of deliberative democracy often regard the media as powerful tool that play important role in people becoming more connected to each other to the stage of public sphere.

## **What is Deliberation?**

If true democracy is already an ideal as Rousseau says, what is deliberative democracy? What is the difference between the two? In order to answer this question, some leading scholars should be addressed here. According to William Rehg and James Bohman, in deliberative way of democracy, it is crucial that citizens (and their representatives) test their interests and reasons in public forum prior

to deciding.<sup>2</sup> John Rawls insists that deliberation should be stemmed from democratic regime and its companion idea of legitimate law.<sup>3</sup> In other words, he believes that substantial requirements are needed in public deliberation. Joshua Cohen deepens this discussion in a sense by insisting that the ideal deliberative procedure is essential in deliberative democracy. This means that the ideal deliberative procedure is meant to provide a model for institutions to mirror. Deliberative procedure here means that outcomes should be resulted from free and reasoned agreement among equals.<sup>4</sup> Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson suggest the alternative. They claim that rather than choosing either proceduralism or constitutionalism, we need to make sure that the practical task of deliberative democrats is to consider how each political institution can be designed to facilitate deliberation.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, another leading scholar, Jürgen Habermas understands the situation more objectively in a sense. He claims that the conditions of deliberation are created by mutual communicative actions, therefore, deliberation can be realized only by citizens who exercise their autonomy actively<sup>6</sup> and who are able to participate in mutual speech acts.

Even if there is some degree of difference in understanding deliberative democracy, they all seem to agree with the fact that deliberation should be achieved in some form of public sphere, which is not necessarily an institution as a physical space, but can also be the social space produced by communication actions.<sup>7</sup> Considering this fact that people become engaged in public sphere in living rooms, classrooms, shopping malls, restaurants, churches etc, where and how do they receive information? In order to analyze this, it is significant to capture where the media stand in political deliberation.

### Who Communicates?

Benjamin I. Page is one of the leading scholars of the media and democracy in terms of breaking the mechanism into more practical level. He suggests that the important factor in order to understand the media in the context of democracy is to analyze how the media themselves function. To be more specific, he focuses on the fact that the information we listen, read and watch is largely

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2 William Rehg and James Bohman, "Discourse and Democracy: The Formal and Informal Bases of Legitimacy," in Rene Von Schomberg and Kenneth Baynes eds., *Discourse and Democracy: Essays on Habermas' Between Facts and Norms*, Albany: SUNY Press, 2002, p.32.

3 John Rawls, "The idea of Public Reason Revisited," in John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, p.574.

4 Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997, p.73.

5 Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, "Moral Disagreement in a Democracy," *Social Philosophy and Policy Foundation*, (Winter 1995), Vol. 12, p.110.

6 Jürgen Habermas, "On the Internal Relation between Law and Democracy," in Jürgen Habermas, *Inclusion of the Other*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001, p.264.

7 Kim, p.142.

mediated by those who he calls “professional communicators.” He deepens his discussion by stating that modern technology can enable millions of people to listen to a single speaker, all at the same time, but the limits of human attention mean that only one speaker at a time can be listened to by everyone else (Page, 1996, 4).

Summarizing what Page discusses, there are at least six types of professional communicators; public officials, experts, reporters, journalists, commentators, television pundits, and different media outlets tend to take distinctive political stands (the *New York Times* is more liberal and the *Wall Street Journal* is more conservative). Also, certain media outlets actively work to shape political discourse to their own purposes, therefore, the mainstream media are sometimes out of touch with the values of ordinary citizens.

Based on his analysis, Page proposes several suggestions for ordinary citizens to be able to use the media more wisely. He states that we must be wary and shop around, and we have to exercise our skepticism about the news or political materials that we see. Addition to this, we should be able to be exposed to alternative media outlets and receive various kinds of ideas on the issue. Most importantly, he argues that we have to expose ourselves to a real diversity of ideas, which means that from time to time, we need to glance at media we generally disagree with. He finally suggests that rich deliberation through the mass media should be accomplished by concurring money-driven media cooperation or organizations. For example, we could subscribe journals by the non-mainstream media outlets or measures to decrease the influence of money on public officials would help make deliberation by those officials more responsive to ordinary citizens, which is more democratic. It is obviously impossible to end the scheme of power and money, but the important thing is to try to limit them.

The last point Page makes is completely another issue and this paper will not deal with it. However, his argument leaves an important factor in understanding the media in the context of democracy, which is stemmed from an argument of institutionalization. Institutionalization and the media do not seem to be accompanied or argued together. However, as Page suggests, if deliberation and information are mediated by those professional communicators, and they operate their job hand in hand with politics, why not we regard journalists as political actors? Also, since it is no question that the media have so much power over politics, why not we cannot think of them as political institution functioning as ‘fourth branch of government’?

Timothy E. Cook actually considers the point of the media playing a role as political institution and journalist as political actors. He argues that not only is the news a ‘coproduction’ of the news media and government, but policy today is likewise the result of collaboration and conflict among newsmen, officials, and other political actors (Cook, 1998, 3). The issue of professional communicators by Page and Cook’s argument of important news being certified by those who are ‘in the position to know’ articulate different perspective. Whereas Page stresses the argument of

professional communicators being mediators of information and deliberation, Cook argues that powerful officials in the government do create news events, certify issues as newsworthy and make news on their own terms.

Yet, Cook states that the media are able to influence powerful political elites. This argument is resulted from 'agenda-setting', which is to highlight particular issues and alternatives, influence perceptions of public moods, and in other ways shape the context of one legislator asking another for support, whether or not the public was involved, had chosen sides, or was even aware of the issue (Cook, 1998, 11). The media outlets receive information from the government, and sometimes wait for authoritative sources to do or say something newsworthy, which do not make the media look as an independent institution. Then, what is the exact position of the media in the political context? What Cook suggests is that news-making and its place in the political system is best conceived as interactive and interdependent, which he calls the 'negotiation of newsworthiness.'

Even if the interpretation of the media in democracy by the two scholars is slightly different, the fundamental argument seems to be the same. In other words, both scholars are cynical about how the media are functioning within the political context. Cook even suggests that there needs to be separated establishment of the media so that powerful political actors could be more independent and do not have to be reliant with the media. He does not claim that political actors must not regard the media as information source, but suggests that they should formulate stronger initiative, and the two needs to maintain certain balance.

As a policy solution, Cook states that public journalism could be significantly effective. In public journalism, journalists are supposed to be more responsive toward the public and be more accountable representative. Also, in this solution, they are more required to be engaged in dialogue with citizens that would lead to some kind of accord on the best course of action.

Here, another significant factor in understanding the media in democratic context should be addressed. That is the dialogue and the part played by it over the media. In the study by Joohan Kim, Robert Wyatt and Elihu Katz, they claim that dialogue or conversation play a significant role in deliberative democracy. In the analysis, they establish four components of deliberative democracy; news-media use, conversation, opinion quality and participation. Under the news-media use, they break down the subject into two; issue specific and general. As a result of their empirical study, they came to the conclusion that issue-specific news-media use was the best predictor not only for issue-specific discussion, but also for general political conversation. This also means that news media use comes before political talk (Kim, Wyatt and Katz, 1999, 361).

More interestingly, the study found out that news media also encourage people's willingness to talk with those who hold different perception or opinion. Also, news media use and political

conversation were also closely associated with participatory activities, but in the complaining type of activities (Kim, Wyatt and Katz, 1999, 379-380). The study revealed that news media use could be major player in deliberation under democracy.

Another study by David Kurpius and Andrew Mendelson should be addressed as well. They focused on a case study approach on civic dialogue on C-SPAN call-in shows. The objective of their study was to analyze how the program, *Washington Journal* approximates a deliberative space for civic dialogue. The focus is, of course, television media. The authors insist that since the majority of American use television as their primary news source, creating a mediated deliberative space must include television. The purpose of dialogue in public life, they argue, is for citizens to work through their issues, aspirations, and concerns, and toward resolution. Stating that talk shows on either radio or television are distinctive from other information sources, such as newscasts or panel discussion programs, they engage directly with the audience regarding political topics.

Under the circumstances that citizens are exposed to opportunity to participate in call-in shows, they are able to become something more than mere spectators, interacting with each other and the host. Then, what does C-SPAN exactly do in democratic society? The authors suggest that it provides the opportunity for citizens to watch government in action through the televising of the US Congress. Also, it provides an opportunity for citizens to become educated on issues of public debate and importance. Then, it also allows chances for citizens, experts, and public policy makers to exchange ideas and to begin working toward a solution or a consensus on an issue (Kurpius and Mendelson, 2002, 590).

Eventually, through their empirical research, they reached to the conclusion that C-SPAN's *Washington Journal* fulfills some but not all of the elements of a deliberative forum. Of course, citizens do have opportunities to air issues and ideas, but those ideas always have to be something new. People tend to spend more time on new ideas than old ones. They also found out that the hosts and guests never try to ask callers for solutions, one's own values, others' values, and consequences of decisions. In other words, since the program try to be so neutral, it only reacts to each caller independently, rather than threading the ideas together, the program itself is not capable of reaching to the level of deliberation. This shows that the exposure to opportunities and people's real understanding of the issue presented by the media are totally distinct issue.

## **Hypothesis**

Having known some literature reviews on the subject, it is safe to assume that the media and its relationship with democracy do obtain some degree of negative aspects. If people follow, for instance, Page's suggestion to practice their skepticism about what they read, hear or watch, it is not hard to imagine that they will become more informed about the issue, but at the same time they

become more capable of exercising skepticism toward government, society or democracy itself. However, what about people's preference toward governmental institutions? Do they trust them or distrust them? Probably, as Muller and Seligson researched on civic culture and democracy and the question of casual relationships between the two, people's support for gradual reform of political institutions is the attitude about societal change that is most unambiguously supportive of democratic procedures (Muller and Seligson, 1994, 639).

## Methodology

This study runs a multivariable linear regression so as to analyze citizen satisfaction with democracy in Canada. Also, it is to see if there is any significant relationship between the level of satisfaction with democracy by citizen (satisfied with the level of democracy) and six independent variables explaining how much people trust in political institution (we can trust people in government to do), how much they trust the media (trust in the media), how they think of the media being powerful (the power of the media), how often they read newspapers (read political content of newspaper), how often they watch television news (watch news programs on TV), and finally how much they have a conversation with others on politics (discussed politics with people). All the information referring the variables comes from Neil Nevitte's *et. al*, database 'PK2002'.

## Result: The relationship between the dependent variables and the independent variables

After running the regression, the findings are reported in Table 1. As it shows, it can be concluded that there are two independent variables that have significant relationship with the dependent variable. They are the independent variables of 'we can trust people in government to do' and 'the power of the media.'

Table 1 Linear Regression

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
Model		B	Standard Error	Beta		
Dep. Var.	Satisfaction with democracy	1.342	.119		11.307	.000
Indep. Var.	We can trust people in government	.266	.027	.298	9.744	.000
Indep. Var.	The power of the media	1.561E-02	.008	.059	1.939	.053
Indep. Var.	Trust in the media	- 8.55E-03	.009	- .029	- .948	.343
Indep. Var.	Read political content on newspaper	- 6.51E-03	.015	- .014	- .430	.668
Indep. Var.	Watch news programmes on TV	- 9.05E-03	.019	- .015	- .472	.637
Indep. Var.	Discussed with people about politics	- 7.55E-03	.023	- .011	- .329	.742

As this reveals, independent variables explaining the power of the media, how often people read political content on newspaper, watch news programs on TV and discussed with people about politics show completely opposite relationship with the dependent variable. Considering standard errors, it can be said that standard errors of only two independent variables are actually smaller than the percentage that each variable has. This also means that there is collinearity between the third and the sixth independent variables. In terms of putting into the equation:  $Y = 1.342 + .0266 X1$  (We can trust people in government to do)  $+ .01561 X2$  (The power of the media)  $+ -.0855 X3$  (Trust in the media)  $+ -.0651 X4$  (Read political content on newspaper)  $+ -.0905 X5$  (Watch news programs on TV)  $+ -.0755 X6$  (Discussed with people about politics) where:

- .0266  $X1 > .027$  (standard error)
- .01561  $X2 > .008$  (standard error)
- .0855  $X3 < .009$  (standard error)
- .0651  $X4 < .015$  (standard error)
- .0905  $X5 < .019$  (standard error)
- .0755  $X6 < .023$  (standard error)

As for explaining the strength of the relationship, the result of the model shows that there is significantly weak relationship. The model shows as follows:

Model	R	R square	Adjusted R	Std. Error of estimate
1	.307	.094	.089	.65

As the adjusted R square shows, only about 9% of citizens' satisfaction level of democracy could be explained with interaction with six independent variables tested above. It can be also stated that even if the power in media variable was the strongest variable among the other five variables on the media, the independent variable of political institution (we can trust people in government) turned out to be the strongest predictor of citizens' satisfaction toward democracy.

## Conclusion

What can be concluded from the empirical data tested above, the most important fact to address is that rather cynical tendency in analyzing the media by scholars introduced in literature review could be true. Also, the result reveals that the exposure to the media and the consequence are two distinctively different factors. Even if you are well exposed to the news media by reading newspapers or watching news programs on TV, that does not necessarily lead to citizens' trust in the media. People do recognize the power of the media as being so influential. However, that is the recognition of the media by people. In other words, it is still superficial. In addition, it does not lead to citizens' satisfaction with democracy either as the tables show.

The only factor that could be stated positively as possibility is what Cook suggests, which is institutionalization of the media. If people feel more comfortable in trusting people in government and if there is such media institution functioning as political player, maybe people's trust in the media would be increased. This argument could be backed up by Muller and Seligson's argument that the best indicator of democratization is people's support of gradual institutionalization. However, it is still an ideal for it to be realized in reality.

In any case, the hypothesis that the more people become exposed to the media use, the more they become cynical and do not necessarily trust the media was proved to be true. This also deepens the discussion on what could be the role and the possibility of the media in deliberative democracy. The answer cannot be only one, however, it seems the fact that rich recognition of the media being so powerful today and yet people do not trust should speak significantly. It might be the result of the real deliberation being done in public spheres. In other words, real deliberation could be only done in more private setting where people talk about political issues more freely based on information that they receive and acknowledge through the media.

The role and the possibility of the media in deliberative democracy are unsettled if the real deliberation is only done in private setting by people. However, on the other hand, the media could play a significant role in order to integrate people's voice. If deliberative democrats all agree with the fact that deliberation is the process of discussion and debate between equal citizens and it should be done in some set of public spheres, the possibility of the media is massive. In this sense, the media's role is operated in multilevel from private to public. Page suggests three conditions for populistic deliberation and uprisings, and one of them is that "channels exist by which members of the public can express outrage."<sup>8</sup> The media's existence itself could be these channels that people are able to utilize. Upon understanding of the media playing a role in multilevel, it is also significant to understand the way the media function, which is to know agenda-setting, relationship with the government, ownership issues etc. Integrated each phase of the media in multilevel of deliberation, a brand new role of the media as a flexible device or institution might occur in the future.

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8 Benjamin I. Page, "Populistic Deliberation and Talk Radio," *Journal of Communication*, (Spring, 1996), Vol. 46, No.2, p.51.

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