The Fourth Age of Political Communication

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Avant-propos

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Professeur émérite de communication publique à l'Université de Leeds et de Journalisme à l'Université du Maryland, Jay G. Blumler s'est imposé comme un des chercheurs majeur dans le domaine de la communication politique sur la scène internationale. Président, puis membre honoraire de la principale association internationale de communication, la International Communication Association, il a participé à la création du *European Journal of Communication*. Il a obtenu en 2005 un prix honorifique pour sa carrière, le American Political Science Association's Murray Edelman Distinguished Career Award. Il s'est très tôt penché sur les études de la télévision en publiant de nombreux ouvrages et articles importants. En 1968, il publiait avec Denis McQuail, *Television in Politics: Its Uses and Influence* (University of Chicago Press), puis quelques années plus tard – en français – avec Roland Cayrol et Gabriel Thoveron, *La Télévision fait-elle l'élection ?* (1978). Il s'est intéressé tout au long de sa carrière à l'articulation entre médias et électeurs, en publiant, entre autres: *Communicating to Voters: Television in the First European Parliamentary Elections* (1983) ; *The Crisis of Public Communication* (avec Michael Gurevitch, 1995). Plus récemment, il a enrichi son travail en s'intéressant aux évolutions induites par Internet, publiant en 2009 : *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship: Theory, Practice and Policy* (avec Stephen Coleman).

Observateur avisé des transformations de la politique, Jay Blumler publie, en 1999, avec Dennis Kavanagh un article séminal, portant sur les « trois âges de la communication politique ». Cet article devient très rapidement l'un des articles les plus cités dans les études internationales. Il va notamment participer d'une transformation des travaux cherchant à comprendre les « interrelations entre les changements dans les médias et les communications d'une part, et les changements dans la culture et la société, d'autre part » (Couldry and Hepp, 2013, p. 197). Pour décrire ce processus, une des hypothèses la plus discutée dans la recherche est celle de la médiatisation du politique, c'est-à-dire l'emprise des logiques médiatiques dans la construction sociale de la réalité par les médias et les politiques (Block, 2013, 259). Ce courant est extrêmement prolixe ces dernières années, comme en témoignent les synthèses récentes dans de grandes revues internationales de communication : *Communications*, 2010 ; *Communication Theory*, 2013 ; *Journalism Practice*, 2014 ; *Journalism Studies*, 2014. En témoignent également les ouvrages récents de Esser et Strömbäck (2014) et de Lundby (2014). Et, rétrospectivement, quatre articles paraissent centraux en regard des débats suscités : Mazzoneli & Schulz (1999) ; Schulz (2004) ; Hjavard (2008) ; Strömbäck (2008).

Le texte de 1999 s'inscrit en parallèle d'autres travaux portant sur les transformations structurelles de l'espace public, des régimes démocratiques et des modes de fonctionnement du journalisme. La définition de ces âges de la communication politique apparaît alors une sorte de prolongement, centré sur la communication, aux travaux de Bernard Manin (2008) portant sur les transformations des principes du gouvernement représentatif. Le tour de force de Jay Blumler consiste à penser les effets de ces transformations sur les modes de régulation du politique et le poids pris par l'univers professionnel qu'on appelle communication sur les autres secteurs d'activité. En 1999, le troisième âge de la communication politique qu'il décrit est celui que Bernard Manin appelle de la « démocratie du public », désignant un mode de fonctionnement du politique où les élus ont recours aux experts en communication, où les élections se déroulent sur la base d'images médiatiques, et où, surtout, on observe une « non-coïncidence entre opinion publique et expression électorale » (Manin, 2008, p. 303). Jay Blumler et Dennis Kavanagh observent alors ce que signifie pour les acteurs politiques et les citoyens cet âge de « l'abondance, l'ubiquité,

la richesse et la vitesse » des informations sur le politique. Ils dégagent au moins cinq tendances de la communication politique : une pression intense à la professionnalisation ; une pression concurrentielle accrue – deux tendances qu'Erik Neveu (2010, p. 246) qualifie par ailleurs de « course à l'armement communicationnel » –; un populisme anti-élitaire des médias et des partis ; une diversification centrifuge ainsi que des transformations dans la manière pour le public de recevoir la politique. Ce texte a fait l'objet de nombreuses critiques et relectures, cherchant à revenir sur les divisions en termes de grandes périodes, ou alors critiquant un prisme par trop centré sur les pays du Nord.

En référence à ce texte, de nombreuses études se sont développées à travers le monde, comme viennent de l'indiquer les coordinateurs de The International *Encyclopedia of Political Communication* (Mazzoleni et al., 2015, p. XXX.). Ces études traitent de la médiatisation du politique, du développement du marketing dans la chose politique, de la personnalisation au sein des partis, de l'éclatement des publics et des modes de consommation des médias, de la remise en cause du journalisme traditionnel, de la mythique crise de la « représentation », etc. La liste n'est évidemment pas close. Les auteurs concluent qu'un « nouveau corps de théorie a pu ainsi être constitué qui pourrait, éventuellement, donner une nouvelle interprétation de ce qu'on pourrait envisager comme un quatrième âge de la communication politique, qui viendrait compléter le troisième », celui initialement décrit par Blumler et Kavanagh. C'est précisément à cet exercice que s'adonne Jay Blumler, lui-même, dans ce texte[1], qu'il a présenté une première fois à Berlin en 2013 au cours d'un workshop[2]. Les éditeurs de ce dossier lui sont particulièrement reconnaissants de leur avoir accordé sa confiance en acceptant la publication dans ses pages.

1. Keynote address delivered at a Workshop on Political Communication Online, the Free University of Berlin, September 12, 2013, after helpful discussions with Stephen Coleman, Winfried Schulz, Giles Moss and Rachel Gibson. An expanded conclusion has been added to the original version.
2. http://www.fgpk.de/en/2013/gastbeitrag-von-jay-g-blumler-the-fourth-age-of-political-communication-2/

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I've said several times in recent writings that political communication is an exceptionally rich, complex, fluid and important sub-field among those that populate the overall field of communications studies. In effect, Barbara Pfetsch has asked me to talk to you about its fluidity. In an essay of characteristic thoroughness and analytical sharpness, entitled "Political Communication in Long-Term Perspective", Winfried Schulz (2014) has distinguished three ways of dealing with the fluidity of political communication: through measured time-series analyses of media content; through trend concepts that typically end in -izations (for example, professionalization and mediatization); and with phase models – of which the specification in a 1999 article by Dennis Kavanagh and myself of three distinct "ages of political communication" that had apparently unfolded over the years since the end of World War II was an example. Well, Winfried, I'm sorry to inform you that you'll have to re-write your essay, for the onset of digital communication demands a fourth conceptualization of change. It might be labeled a "species change" – but I'll reserve what I have in mind by that to the end of my talk!

Briefly summarizing how Kavanagh and I (1999) depicted the several ages: – in the first, much political communication was subordinate to relatively strong political institutions and beliefs, so that political parties and leaders enjoyed a relatively easy communication ride in the media of the period (p. 211-212);

– in the second age, limited channel network television became the prime political communication medium, with an increasingly important role for television news in reporting events and channeling advocacy (p. 212-213);

– and we said that the third, then still developing, age was primarily one of communication "abundance, ubiquity, reach and celerity" (especially abundance), due chiefly to the conversion of limited-channel to multi-channel television (p. 213-217). In consequence, we maintained, third-age political communication was being re-shaped by five main trends: intensified professionalizing pressures; increased competitive pressures; anti-elitist populism; centrifugal diversification; and changes in how people receive politics (p. 217-225).

But what might be said about the main features of the political communication process in the fourth age? I'd like to tackle the answer to that question in steps.

Main features of the political communication process

First, there are certain features of the third age, which have spilled over into the fourth age, albeit "more so" or somewhat differently perhaps.

One has been the avalanche of yet more communication abundance than anything that Kavanagh and I could have imagined in 1999 – in mainstream media, throughout the Internet, plus the scads of devices – at home, at work, on the road and in hand – over which people can receive communications now. In some ways this can disadvantage the provision of relatively serious political communications. The intensified competition for audience attention works against it, as does the availability in the media of so many other more immediately appealing genres – sport, music, fashion, cookery, soap opera and other popular drama, reality shows, celebrity antics, easy to take documentaries – you name it. In this situation, political communicators may be under pressure to think more about the presentational appeals of their messages than about what they want to put across substantively. And among West European public service broadcasters, the civic mission which once seemed so central to their raison d'être appears to have diminished – though not been foresworn. (Evidence from a body of comparative research shows that public broadcasters still do present more hard news then commercial ones, for example.) But abundance may also be changing the make-up of

the audience for politics, allowing more people to choose what they want to consume – and only that. On the other hand, in today's news-saturated ecology even politically indifferent people might find it difficult to avoid some of the bombardment of politically relevant material.

But is the score-card of abundance for worthwhile political communication all negative? Can the gloom be tempered by invoking Eric Idle's theme song, "Always Look on the Bright Side of Life"? For example, in present conditions the watchdog role, involving exposures of institutional and human rights abuses of all kinds, may be performed more often by journalists and Internet activists alike. This presumably explains why William Dutton has characterised the Internet as a Fifth Estate (Dutton, 2009).

And then there's "mediatization", a concept and to some extent a practice which has stormed its way into political communication scholarship, ever since an article by Winfried and his colleague Gianpietro Mazzoleni, entitled "'Mediatization' of Politics: A Challenge for Democracy?" (Mazzoleni, Schulz, 1999) appeared in the very same issue of the journal – Political communication – that published my own "third age" piece. I will here only remind you of the theory's view that politicians (and by extension other opinion advocates) will tend to tailor their message-offerings to the perceived news values, newsroom routines and journalism cultures prevalent in the mainstream media of their societies. But do notice that I have just used the phrase, "mainstream media" in that formulation. How might the present-day availability of Internet-based communication facilities affect this presumed politician-journalist relationship? With opportunities to communicate their messages without journalistic intervention over the Internet, will mediatization constraints be less binding on politicians? Might they even be able to restore a measure of political logic to their rhetorical arsenal? Or might politicians just try instead to ride a two-horse chariot – less journalistically driven when on line communications are prepared but as fully and determinedly mediatized as ever when aiming for mainstream media takeup of their messages?

The last third age feature I'll mention that seems to have developed further in the fourth age is "centrifugal diversification". Kavanagh and I considered that communication abundance had opened up possibilities for more diverse content to be produced; more voices to be heard and more audience members to be reached by such material (1999, p. 221-223).

It is my impression that since then, this process has gathered yet more steam. An example is the increased number and range of non-party but civic-minded bodies that are now on the political scene, some of them armed with media-savvy, that is professionalized publicity departments, and able at times to achieve impressive visibility and recognition in news reports. Among others, these include think tanks, charities, numerous cause and campaigning groups, other interest and pressure groups, single-issue protesters, international agencies, parliamentary committees and, yes, academics with relevant findings on an issue or social problem. Interestingly, to get heard such groups may have advantages over traditional politicians – by not suffering so much from a credibility/mistrust discount and by being able to pick and choose the timing of their publicity efforts, unlike leading politicians who may have to be on the news publicity grind at a 24/7 pace. And it seems likely that the advent of the Internet will have facilitated this mushrooming of civic associations, making it easier and less costly for them to mobilize support, coordinate action, keep regularly in touch with members and sympathisers and generally send messages off hither and yon. Thinking back momentarily on my earlier remarks about mediatization, another limitation on its conceptualisation so far is the almost exclusive attention that has been paid to the media-politician nexus, almost ignoring, then, those news-making processes in which non-party civic groups relate to journalism.

But if there is a fourth age of political communication, its crux must be the ever-expanding diffusion and utilization of Internet facilities – including their continual innovative evolution – throughout society, among all institutions with political goals and with politically relevant concerns and among many individual citizens. All this has evidently produced a vibrant communicative sphere, which though not coordinated or coherent overall, includes many new opportunities for expression and exchange - and also for learning what others are saying elsewhere. Hence, what we used to call interpersonal communication in politics – which mainly took place in the family, among friends and with workmates – has been completely transformed. All this has unleashed an incredibly diverse range of globally expansive and temporally synchronous communicative networks, enlarging opportunities for linkage between dispersed social actors. It has also complicated the lives of politicians wanting or feeling they need to manage

news and publicity to their advantage. Whereas in the past political leaders and their strategists geared up to cover and intervene in television, radio and press outlets, now they are involved to a considerable extent in multi-dimensional impression management.

Our old model of the political communication process is kaput!

In consequence, the model of the political communication process that dominated our scholarship in the past, my own included, is kaput – well, if not kaput, then is hobbling round on two amputated legs! That model was essentially pyramidal on a politics to media to audience slope. According to it, most audience members most of the time were simply receivers of institutionally originated communications. Most involvement beyond that was organized and conducted by elite personnel. But with the arrival of the internet, those individuals have become a communicating force – or a set of forces – in their own right, to opinion trends among whom the former monopolists of political communication must now closely attend.

In her first-class book on Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy, co-authored with Kees Brants, Katrin Voltmer has referred to all this as a process of "de-centralization" (Brants, Voltmer, 2011). I'm inclined to put it differently. It seems to me that what we are experiencing is the emergence of an ecology of two different levels of political communication – for shorthand purposes, call them institutionalized ones and grassroots ones – which are productive in the main of two different forms of political communication. And if so, perhaps we should eventually aim to establish a) how they compare and contrast with each other, b) how they relate – or perhaps do not relate – to each other and c) what this could mean for citizenship and democracy.

It would be natural to ponder in this connection the roles of those lynch-pins of the old political communication order – agenda-setting and framing. Are they converging on the two levels, tending to diverge – or does it all depend? For what it's worth, my own hunch is that there's likely to be more convergent agenda-setting than framing across the levels, some tendency to talk about the same issues and events but more often interpreting them differently.

Of course in terms of the communications that reach them and how they respond to them, many individuals straddle both levels; they follow the

news and send messages to others, as it were. What differences between what transpires and is put across on the two levels, if any, are they aware of and does such awareness matter in any way? What about the perceived trustworthiness of communications and their sources? What about their perceived veracity? What about the marked differences of rhetorical style? What about contrasting outlooks on political reality? What about assessments of the mixed quality of political communication that may seem to prevail at each level – on the mainstream level, that of principled conviction versus Machiavellian maneuvering and at the grass roots level, that of considered concern versus crude populism?

One feature of the new dispensation which has attracted attention is the fragmentation that has derived from communication diversification and sociopolitical diversification combined. Bennett and Iyengar (2008) have outlined a chain of consequences that could result from this. In their view, we are entering a new era, in which as a result of audience and media fragmentation, selective exposure by people to communications in line with their own beliefs, tending to reinforce them thereby, is becoming more likely, contributing to a polarization of political and media blocs in turn. But a cross-national question does arise over this alleged sequence: are the patterns that have emerged so prominently in the United States also appearing elsewhere to a significant degree; or is the U.S. something of an exceptional outlier in these regards?

The four formative features of the fourth age of communication

To sum up, the bifurcated political communication system of the fourth age is quite different from its predecessors. Where a relative uniformity, coherence and simplicity once prevailed, now everything seems to be laced with complexity, multiplicity, variety and cross-currents. Andrew Chadwick (2013) has tried to capture some of this in his notion of hybridization, maintaining that political communication today involves an intermixing and blending on all its levels – structure, modes of actor involvement, media logics, production processes, message contents and citizens' communication diets. Whether hybridization is so all-embracing as Chadwick makes out - his empirical research to date has been limited to a selection of British and American case studies – remains to be established, however.

Meanwhile scholars are challenged to grapple with four formative features of the fourth age. One can be termed "bifurcated efficacy". On the one hand, people may experience high levels of efficacy as a result of being able to communicate with each other so readily by email and over Facebook and Twitter. On the other hand, unless they are dedicated activists, they can rarely connect their discourses, feelings and ideas to the institutions of governance. The widespread prevalence of a sense of political inefficacy in the latter respect remains an obdurate problem of democracy.

Secondly, there is the buffeting of elite-mass relations by stronger cross-currents than previously experienced. Lance Bennett's theory of press-state relations – postulating substantial elite influence on mass communication – maintains that the news tends to "index" views prevalent among and voiced by dominant political elites (Bennett, 1990). Since its formulation in 1990, however, political journalism has become more independently interpretive; there has been an upsurge in the popularity of populist parties and leaders who are vocally critical and scornful of the political establishment; and the communication elites themselves appear to have become less bipolar with the advent of a host of cause and campaigning groups bolstered by the availability of newer-found online channels to put their messages across.

What might all this mean, thirdly, for the fate of hitherto dominant ideological narratives? On one view, protesters and the previously unvoiced have many more opportunities to join forces, to communicate with each other, mount collective action and infiltrate their marginalised positions into mainstream journalism and politics. On an opposite view, such endeavours are bound to be thwarted by the increasing commercialization of the media both old and new in the digital era, thereby strengthening the hegemony of capitalist ideology and interests.

Fourthly, the chances of enlisting communication in the service of effective citizenship in a meaningful form of democracy appear mixed and cloudy. On the one hand, vigorous fresh thinking has brought new normative concepts to the democratic table: deliberation, authenticity, transparency, participation, inclusiveness, civility. But on the other hand, the prospects for realizing, on a society-wide level at least, anything resembling the ideal speech conditions of Habermas' public sphere seem quite remote (Habermas, 1984/1987).

Now, what about that fourth form of change which I mentioned at the outset of this talk? It can be approached by recalling an essay, entitled "The Hedgehog and the Fox", which was authored by the brilliant English political theorist, Sir Isaiah Berlin. According to him, the hedgehog knows one thing (like Plato, for example) while the fox knows many things (like Aristotle). Regarded in this light, it is as if when mainstream media dominated, many communication scholars could, for much of the time at least, be hedgehogs – but now all of us simply have to be foxes!

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