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Abstract

Book Review

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Rousiley C.M. Maia, *Deliberation, the Media and Political Talk*, New York: Hampton Press, 2012, 371 pages.

This book brings together in a sophisticated way the empirical literature on the media and deliberation. The media were always problematic for the deliberative model. First, it is very difficult to establish the deliberative quality of the media; second, to the extent that there are good empirical data, most media have a rather low deliberative quality.¹ Rousiley Maia's book takes a big step forward in investigating the interplay of the media and deliberation, and is exemplary in this respect. Maia takes a systems approach, which is very timely for the current general discussion on deliberation.² A systems approach means for Maia to investigate the role of the media for the overall deliberative quality of a political system. Most of the empirical research on deliberation has been at the micro level with studies of face-to-face group discussions and online debates. How, then, does such research relate to the level of deliberative systems? What does it mean to talk about a deliberative system? As Maia correctly points out, at this meta level the media play a crucial role. After all, the major political messages are transmitted by the media. How could one establish the deliberative quality of an entire media system? This is the ambitious task that Maia addresses.

The book has three parts. Part I is entitled "Integrating Theoretical Perspectives on Deliberative Democracy and Media Studies." Maia accomplishes this integrative task superbly, covering a wide range of both theoretical and empirical literature. The 100-page in-depth literature review is already in itself a major contribution to the ongoing discussion on the role of the media for deliberation.

Part II presents three very different cases of media coverage in Maia's native Brazil. The first case deals with a national referendum on banning firearms sales, the second case with a dramatic bus hijacking, and the third with a soap opera involving homoerotic relations. Maia clearly explains how she and her collaborators have chosen the media to be studied and the coding procedures used. Four aspects of deliberation are differentiated (p. 106).

1. Accessibility and characterization of participants: Who gains access to media arenas? What are the inclusion criteria, and how much space or time is allocated to sources?
2. Use of arguments: Do participants present reasons in support of their views, preferences, recommendations, and commands? Is persuasion attempted through justification and demonstration?
3. Reciprocity and responsiveness: Is there any dialogue or any possibility of mutual response among sources? Who responds to whom?
4. Reflexivity and reversibility of opinions: Are changes in position or preferences observable?

Having analyzed the three Brazilian cases according to these four criteria, Maia concludes "that the media arena is a rather complex terrain; the role of media agents in

¹¹ Jürg Steiner, *The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy. Empirical Research and Normative Implications*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, Chapter 8.

² See in particular John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (eds.), *Deliberative Systems*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

managing news sources and their claims and thus in shaping public debate is highly diversified” (p. 317). Maia finds, on the one hand, “that the mass media may hinder and even preclude democratic practices in many circumstances: by producing inaccurate and misleading information, or even expressing outright lies; by being obsessed with personalities, dramatization, and scandal-mongering; and by concentrating power, privileging elites, and excluding many voices, particularly those of marginalized groups” (p. 316). This is a finding that one may expect from anecdotal evidence in many countries. But Maia insists that this is a one-sided perspective and gives empirical evidence

that the mass media can, in some circumstances, favor democratic practices by providing intelligible, accurate, and properly interpreted information; by exploiting emotions, drama, and personal narratives that encourage critical reflection and democratic debates; and by playing a relatively independent role, monitoring government abuses, and protecting civil rights (p. 316).

I find it particularly creative of how Maia has analyzed the media reporting on soap operas with homoerotic aspects. At first sight, it may appear that such reporting has no great relevance under the aspect of deliberation. But focusing on soap operas with homoerotic characters, Maia can show how the media deal with profound prejudices in such situations. She finds that these “soap operas helped translate feelings and intuitions into perspectives that were presented, defended, and negotiated publicly. They fostered a space in which nonproblems were questioned and helped people perceive the most relevant aspects of the issues on the agenda ... the broad visibility of television programs, and alternative forms of communication, provided by soap operas, helped to feed a public debate, resulting in a joint reconstruction and re-elaboration of meanings, understandings, and identities (p. 206). I applaud that Maia investigates not only how a political issue was reported in the media but also how this is done for a bus hijacking and soap operas. In this way, her findings acquire broader significance.

Although it is important how the media report on public events, this is not the entire story. It is also important to investigate what ordinary citizens do with such reporting. This is precisely what Maia does in Part III, which presents the results of three additional projects. The first project co-authored with Ângela C.S. Marques is based on eight focus groups with underprivileged women, who are beneficiaries of a Brazilian income transfer program. As the basis for a discussion of their experience, participants were shown extracts of newspaper articles, television newscasts, and weekly magazines on the program. The second project, co-authored with Danila Cal, deals with children, especially girls, who work in other people’s households. Such child labor is forbidden in Brazil but still widely practiced. In five focus groups, housewives as potential employers of such child labor discussed the issue, again based on news media items. The third project co-authored with Ricardo F. Mendonça, covers the political struggle of people affected by leprosy in contemporary Brazil. Here, the research design was different in the sense that no news media items were handed out to participants, but instead coverage of the issue was studied in an activist specialized newspaper and two mainstream newspapers.

The results of the first two projects in this Part III are summarized as follows: “In most situations, people combined published opinions and discourses available in the media arena with personal experiences, group narratives, and issues of public concern. During this process, participants moved back and forth among interpretations, recommendations, judgments put forth in the media arena, and affective assessments of personal experience” (p. 322). Maia and her collaborators “conclude that people are by no means passive bystanders but purposeful and often reasoning actors, who selectively examine political information” (p. 323). For the third project in this Part III, the results are less positive from a deliberative perspective, because there is little connection between what is said or written in the focus groups, the activist newspaper and the mainstream newspapers: “Our findings show that discursive flow through different arenas is not guaranteed a priori but faces many obstacles” (p. 326).

In concluding the book, Rousiley Maia states that “my collaborators and I have sought to show that the mass media, with all its shadows and lights, significantly interfaces with deliberative processes, with all their perils and aspirations” (p. 327). In an inductive way, the book generates many creative hypotheses about these interfaces between mass media and deliberation. In future research, such hypotheses need to be empirically tested in a vigorous way at a cross national level. Maia is correct that this needs to be done at a systems level, where it can be shown how the media interact with both political leaders and ordinary citizens. In the first instance, research must focus on what political leaders say in parliamentary debates, press conferences, party conventions and so on, and it must be measured how deliberative these speech acts are.³ Next, it must be studied how the media frame and interpret these messages from political leaders. The key question will be to what extent the deliberative level at the elite level is accurately replicated in the media. My suspicion is that the media tend to down play the deliberative aspects and focus instead on who is winning and losing in a pure power game. Going into more detail, one has to establish which messages are particularly down played in their deliberative quality by the media and which media do so. If politicians state, for example, that they change positions due to hearing convincing counter arguments, one has to see which media present such statements in an undistorted way and what other media dismiss these statements as clever power ploys.

A further research step involves the interactions between what is reported in the media and discussions among ordinary citizens. One has to study to what extent a nondeliberative reporting in the media makes the conversations among citizens less deliberative. It also could be, however, that citizens react to the cynicism of the media in dismissing such reporting and emphasize deliberative aspects in their own conversations. One also has to study the flow of communication from ordinary citizens to the media and from the media to political leaders. With the increasing usage of deliberative experiments in mini publics of ordinary citizens,⁴ one hopes that the results are reported in an undistorted way in the media. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many media either do not report on such experiments, or if they do so in a distorted way. One has to study which experiments of mini publics do better in which media. Furthermore, it is

³ Using a measurement instrument like the Discourse Quality Index (DQI), see Jürg Steiner, André Bächtiger, Markus Spörndli, Marco R. Steenbergen, *Deliberative Politics in Action. Analyzing Parliamentary Debates*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, appendix.

⁴ Steiner, *The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy*, Chapter 1.

interesting to see how the level of deliberation in the media reflects on the level of deliberation among political leaders. For this entire research agenda, the book of Rousiley Maia is an excellent guide.

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