Book title: An Introduction to Political Communication

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BOOK REVIEW: INTRODUCTION TO POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

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Introduction

Dr Brian McNair, an Australian author and academician, has explained the basic ideas concerning political communication in his book "An Introduction to Political Communication", which discusses in detail the transmission of information in society for the purpose of politics and control.

The author, Brian McNair, is a journalism professor from Queensland University, Australia. The book discusses the role of communication in politics, and how citizens respond to political messages transmitted to them through media from political actors. The political actors are defined as individuals trying to influence decision making though different means.

The book has been updated from time to time, this is why a new edition focuses on the changing trends in the area of political communication in different countries. The book's first edition had been published in 1995, discussing how a young Tony Blair emerged in politics of the UK. Blair led a somewhat new type of left political party, the New Labor, which won three elections under him and remained in rule for about 13 long years. However, with the emergence of the book's fifth edition, Tony had left the corridors of power, while New Labor was also replaced by a government that was the first coalition rule in the UK after the 2nd World War. Before becoming the prime minister in May 2010, David Cameron, the Conservative Party leader, was labeled as Blair's 'real successor' for his wish to 'decontaminate' the Conservative notion and access a de-ideologised British people, which rendered the old class politics irrelevant. Cameron emulated most of the policies and style of Blair.

The author claims that the New Labor brought a revolution in how political communication is practiced not only in the UK, but also in other parts of the world where democracy existed. The party remained in the government for about 13 years, which introduced the concept of 'spin' and other notions like 'on message' and 'Mandelsonian'.

By the year 2010, the Internet and other online social sites had been started to be used for the purpose of political communication. Different political actors, by 2010, were regularly using Facebook and Twitter to reach out to the electorates and other political stakeholders. Authorities concerned also started using the Internet to publish official information on public inquiries, judicial reviews and other events. There were certain authoritarian regimes which resisted the spread of the technology while there were a number of democratic governments which were not good grasping the ways how to manage information in a global, rather digitized world in the year 2010.

Division of the book

The book has been divided in two parts. Part-I is titled "Politics in the Age of Mediation" and the Part-II is titled "Communicating Politics".

Part-I: "Politics in the age of mediation"

This part thoroughly discusses different chapters that look at political media and how they affect society. The author also mentions the media role in democracy and says that democratic regime should have three basic characteristics: constitutionality, participation, rational choice [by voters]. In a social setup, the media mirrors the aspirations of people and conveys that information in the shape of public opinion to the government. The policymakers then frame policies on the basis of the public opinion on various issues.

Media also have several functions in democratic societies. One, they perform monitoring/surveillance role by informing citizens of the occurrences taking place in their respective areas. Second, the media should ensure truthful news and must educate as to the meaning of facts and journalists should remain detached from the issues being analyzed. Thirdly, the media should serve as a platform for generation of public opinion and also share this opinion back with where it came from. The media should also be a platform where one can express his or her dissent, a characteristic that is indispensable for democratic consensus.

Fourth, the media have to give coverage to not only the governmental but also various political institutions. And finally, in democratic societies, the media are a platform that carries political points of views. The media must give cover all parties, which need space to articulate policies before audiences.

The book mentions that in case an education system is unable to produce what it calls "rational voters", it results in political apathy, which means many voters do not even vote in elections, thinking their vote may not be so much helpful in bringing a positive change in their living standards.

Often times, audiences not just face information but media attempts to manipulate their views on various issues. Daniel Boorstin framed the term 'pseudo-event' in 1962, and the term meant what he described as a tendency media to cover unauthentic 'happenings'. He said this trend emerged in the nineteenth century when the press realized that they need more news items to fulfill their needs.

In the United States, the first ever interview of a known personality was held in 1859, while the first press release was issued in 1907 in America.

McNair argues that objectivity, one of the journalism ethics, also seems unattainable. There are a number of reasons behind why the media coverage of political issues has bias, and it is subjective, not objective; it is impartial but in fact partisan. When a newspaper reaches the reader, it is a result of gatekeeping in which some news are selected for publication while others are rejected. Also, the news selected are then given proper space and emphasis as per their significance.

Part-II: "Communicating politics"

This portion of the book discusses the political communication tactics used by various political actors including pressure groups not only at the grassroots but also at the national and international levels. It also sheds light on topics such as public relations, "political advertising", as well as marketing, etc.

For political communications, the parties use advertisements and also public relations techniques. Advertising has strength, ie it can include all those information, which a normal public relations technique might not have. For example, there is much difference between advertisements and news or press releases. The press release issued by a political actor is not published as a whole but the journalists and media management see which information are news worthy and which information can be dropped from publication and the reason is the journalistic ethic of impartiality.

Advertisement has a strength: its encoding in the in control of the political actor who issues it and who is its producer while its decoding rests with eh audience or the receivers. However, the advertising has one weakness: the reader/audience already knows it is "biased" information, if not total propaganda. This is why stakeholders in the political communication try

to avail the services of free media. However, an organization needs to spend money on hiring professional PR practitioners in order to ensure free access to media for coverage. Politicians also need to spend funds and time on creating and arranging events, which can attract media coverage. The term "free media" means can also be described as "political marketing" and "public relations" as opposed to the advertising sector, where each ad is paid for in the media.

Given the significant role of media in the process of political communication, the 20th century saw emergence of what Stanley Kelley called "a class of professional propagandists" who were skilled in effective political communication. Nowadays people involved in this job come between the politicians and the press, while the media and politicians need each other in society.

Political communication came out of the corporate PRs; it initially rapidly grew in the beginning of the 20th century in the United States. In 1917, Wilson, the American president, set up a "Federal Committee on Public Information" to manipulate public opinion regarding about 1st World War. In 1928, the Democratic Party set up a full-time PRs office, and the Republicans did the same in the year 1932. Ever since, the teams of presidential candidates have had the PR experts.

Four kinds of "political public relations":

First, we have *media management*, which means those activities aimed to tap into the needs of the mass media and thus give politicians exposure. Such activities include the planning of *medialities*, media-friendly events that attract the attention of journalists.

A second kind is *image-management* in political public relations. It means the personal image of a politician and how it can be molded to suit organizational goals, and also the image of the political organization. The latter activity may also be described as *political marketing*.

Similarly, the *internal communications* means setting up channels to transmit information within an organization, internally coordinate activities and manage the feedback.

Also, fourth kind of public relations is *the information management* meaning how the political actors in corridors of power manipulate information by utilizing different covert and open methods. They selectively spread information and sometimes distortion information to manage public opinion.

Conclusion and critique

In short, the book discusses the growing influence of mass communication in different political situations and how public opinion is formed in the "public sphere". The term "public sphere" was introduced by Jurgen Hebermas, a German philosopher, and it refers to those public places where people debate different issues ultimately leading to the formation of public opinion. The author not only discusses the role of communication and mass media in the domestic political affairs of any society but says that the political process carries a global dimension since the world has become a global village in the present-day era owing to the Internet and other digital communication technologies. Different countries depend on each other for a host of reasons, such as economic, diplomatic or military interests and issues. In the pursuit of such issues, different nation-states and the governments not just make use of the conventional power instruments like use of military force, or financial pressures but the public opinion as well, both domestically and overseas.

The author should have named this book as "political communication" or "intricacies of political communication" as it discusses the subject in detail, with examples from different countries about how political leaders used media and information to their advantage. In addition,

the author's writing is interesting and is a sort of narration that paints pictures in the minds of the readers.

One more key aspect of the book is that it offers historical contexts for different issues. For example, it mentions how the different political leaders rose to power in history of the UK and the US and also sheds light on how advertising and public relations emerged in the US and UK and the changing trends in these spheres.

Also, the book is very useful for the public relations practitioners of various organizations as well as the communication personnel of political parties' leaders. It is a must-read for those engaged in what the author calls political marketing. Similarly, it is also a good read for the students of political science and media studies.