

Communication revolutions and conceptions of democracy

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1. Purpose

The general purpose of this project is to study the relationship between communication revolutions and conceptions of democracy within the last century. Focusing on three major inventions in mass communication: Radio, TV and the Internet, the idea is to study firstly if and how conceptions of democracy have influenced the way in which these media have been formed and are used. Secondly, the idea is to investigate whether the existence and functioning of these media has had any effects on the way in which ideas on democracy are formulated, and democracy as such is perceived. So, generally speaking the idea is to investigate the dialectical relationship between the three mentioned media and democratic theory during the last century.

2. Theoretical approach

Theoretically, the project will apply three different approaches to the mass communication revolutions: a technology determinist approach, a historical institutionalist approach, and a social constructivist approach. It is the theoretical ambition of the project to be able to conclude, on the basis of the application of these approaches to case studies of especially the break-through period of the three media (the 1920s, the 1960s and the 1990s), which of the three approaches that has the best explanatory value in terms of understanding how the media is constituted.

Very roughly speaking, a technology determinist approach will predict that it is first of all the technological characteristics of these media that determine and delimited their function and use, and thereby also their impact on democracy (de Sola Pool 1990). A social constructivist approach will try to unravel (deconstruct) the ways in which different conceptions of democracy, in competition with other ideas, might enter into or are articulated in the very creation and diffusion of these technologies (Bijker 1995, Hoff, Horrocks & Tops (eds.) 2000), and the way in which a certain understanding of its use becomes dominant. A historical institutionalist approach (Thelen & Steinmo 1999) will predict that there is a certain institutional inertia, "imitation" and "path-dependency" at work. Thus, it is easily imagined that the institutions build around one type of mass media is "copied" with the event of a new kind of mass media. This paves the road for a certain national "trajectory" or "developmental path", which is what is meant by "path-dependency".

Working with three cases: Radio, TV and the Internet in a predominantly national (Danish) context will provide an excellent opportunity to test the pro's and con's of these three theoretical approaches and to intervene in the discussion about their relevance and usefulness in communication technology research. However, especially if the historical institutionalist approach seem to have a superior explanatory power it will be advisable to study other national contexts with different institutional setups, for example different regulatory regimes. Here, a natural comparison would be with a country with a more liberal regulatory regime (for example the US), and a country with fully nationalised mass media (for example China).

3. Operationalization

In trying to operationalize the relationship between technology, conceptions of democracy, and institutions and the different media, it is necessary to be more precise about what is meant by Radio,

TV or the Internet as mass media. My approach to this question will focus on the practices which constitute these media. There are three types of practices, which I see as crucial in this respect. The first is what I prefer to call *the practices of production* constituting the media. This is the way in which technology and content is provided, by whom, how it is organized, etc. The second is what I prefer to call *the practices of regulation* constituting the media. By this I understand the political, economical and juridical regulation of the media, or the building and maintenance of a certain regulatory regime. The third is *the practices of reception*, or who the audience is, and how it constitutes itself. Focus here is on the listeners, the viewers and the surfers; how they perceive themselves and how they digest and use the information and communication possibilities they are exposed to.

In order to get an idea about the possible importance of democratic ideals for these practices, it is necessary to look at the factors that determine how these practices have come to look especially in the phase where these media became mass media. This means studying the arguments, discussions, conflicts, etc. (the rationalities) of the actors who made decisions on how production and regulation of these media should be organized. It also means analysing patterns of reception in different segments of the population, and the ideas and values listeners, viewers and surfers themselves connect with their media consumption. Focus in this study will be on the two first mentioned aspects (production and regulation).

4. Methodological consideration

This project is a multiple case study. Three (national) cases (Radio, Tv; Internet) are studied on three dimensions using three different theoretical approaches. In order to get an overview of the empirical data needed to shed light on the different research questions raised above I have constructed the scheme below:

Table 1. Necessary data sources.

	Radio	Tv	Internet
Practices of production	Literature studies Archival research Research on parliamentary decisions, reports, etc. Interviews with managers, technologists, and journalists on national public, regional public and commercial radio stations.	Same as radio.	Literature studies. Interviews with employees on private website (Jubii ?), public website (www.danmark.dk or ministry), and NGO website (?).
Practices of regulation	Literature studies Archival research Research on law and regulations. Eventual interviews with key players in the field	Same as radio.	Literature studies Studies of national 'soft' and 'hard' regulation of the Internet (national IT-plans, patents, standards, copyright, etc.). Eventual interviews

			with key players in the field.
Practices of reception	Literature studies Overview of earlier studies, surveys, etc. of audience behaviour. Eventual national survey concerning media use covering both radio, TV and Internet.	Same	Same

Using these different types of data will hopefully provide an adequate basis for: a) looking at how important different types of arguments; technological, democratic or institutional, have been in constituting the practices of production, regulation and reception, and b) thereby testing the relative explanatory value of the different theoretical approaches. If nothing else the investigation of the early phases of the introduction of radio and TV will be of considerable interest; especially in terms of their historical heritage and thereby their wider societal implications.

5. Publication plan and time schedule

It is the aim of this project to produce a monograph covering both theoretical considerations and empirical findings.

Jan. 2003 – Dec. 2003 Collection of data connected with TV and radio. Eventual interviews.
Planning of eventual national survey.

Jan. 2004 – July. 2004 Writing part I of monograph. Execution of eventual national survey.

July 2004- Dec. 2004 Collection of data connected with Internet. Eventual interviews.

Jan. 2005- Aug. 2005 Writing part II of monograph. Possible research application for phase 2 of the project (US and China). .