

Book Review

Jacques Gerstle (2008)

La communication politique, 2nd ed.

Paris: Armand Colin

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As one would expect from the leading French investigator of political communication, this welcome new edition provides a comprehensive and clear summary of the immense volume and range of publications on this subject. While recognising that most of the research and commentary has been American, Gerstle's treatment has the advantage of detachment, coming from a non-Anglo-American author. However, much of the empirical data relates to France. Drawing upon and synthesising his extensive earlier work, this book provides a succinct analytical guide to a vast literature: theoretical, technical-electronic, practical and experimental.

Gerstle emphasises the priority that high speed media accord to the ephemeral short term over the enduring long term and to excessive stress on negative news, attributing blame, over positive news that is deemed to be of less public interest. Politicians and journalists are in competition over the crucial issue of defining political situations, with the ability to do so shifting in favour of the journalists. Having to counteract the increasing distrust and derision to which they are subjected, politicians have responded by resorting to propagandist persuasion, so that official communication has been polluted in the service of top-down governmental domination of public information for electoral advantage. However, experience has shown that being a successful communicator is not an accurate indicator of being an effective decision-maker. There is some discussion of the bottom-up, public participation attempt to influence the political agenda through deliberative democracy procedures to secure better informed discussion prior to policy decisions, assisted by the new electronic technology, particularly in local decision-making matters. However, Gerstle mentions the resource inequality of access to the media, so that the majority of the people - deemed to be ignorant, incompetent, indifferent and alienated - are largely at the mercy of elite-controlled communication processes. A discussion of the domineering role of media magnates who monopolise much of the newspaper and TV channels of communication, with governments in liberal democracies inclined to subservience to them, would have been welcome.

The general assessment that emerges from this wide-ranging analysis is that public perception as conveyed by the media has been significantly substituted for the realities of actual political activity. Democratic accountability suffers from this manipulation and biased information that is an insult to better educated electorates. Feeling condemned to critical impotence, many people lose faith in the potentially elite-challenging electoral process, reflected in declining voter turnout and episodic recourse to direct action as a way of communicating their protest to those that purport to exercise power in their name.