

Reviews

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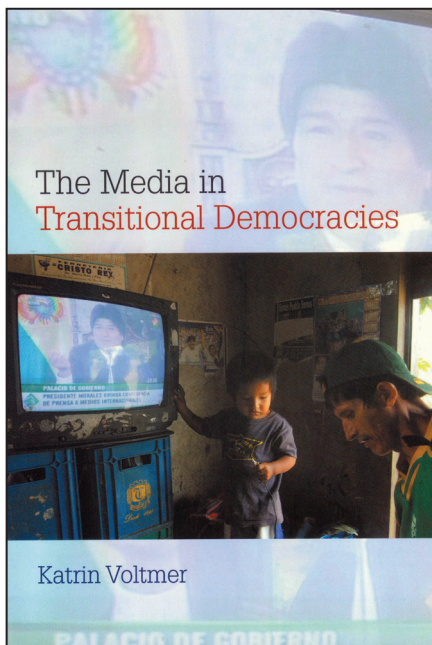
The ‘woman in red’, media democracy and reviving public trust

The Media in Transitional Democracies, by Katrin Voltmer. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. 275 pp. ISBN: 9780745644592 (pbk).

Rethinking Journalism: Trust and participation in a transformed news landscape, edited by Chris Peters and Marcel Broersma. London and New York: Routledge, 2013. 247 pp. ISBN: 9780415697026 (pbk).

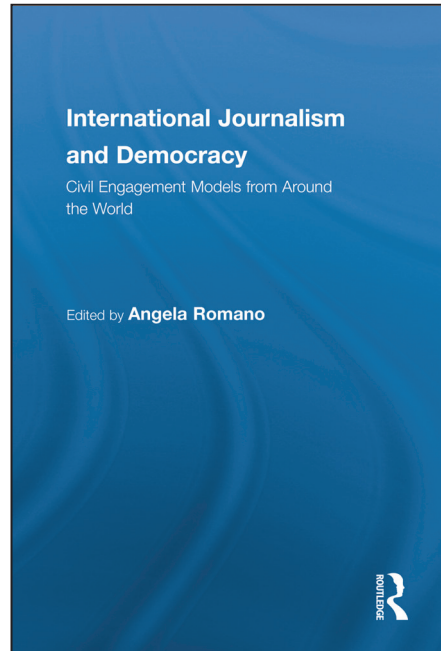
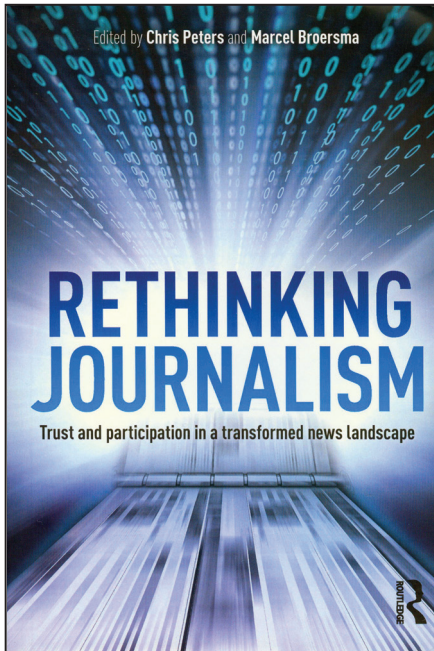
International Journalism and Democracy: Civic engagement models from around the world, edited by Angela Romano. Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010 & 2013. 251 pp. ISBN: 9780415961103 (hbk).

WHEN the so-called ‘woman in red’ became a reluctant icon of a people’s revolt in Turkey in June, the state violence quickly



targeted the news media. Ceyola Sungur, an academic at Istanbul’s Technical University, was projected into instant global fame because of media images of her being blasted at point blank-range with pepper spray by security police.

Dressed in a red summer dress, the unarmed and defenceless woman’s defiance in the face of state assaults on protesters demonstrating over plans to remove the city’s central Gezi Park adjoining Taksim Square to make way for mega property development, became an iconic symbol of resistance. But as Turkish police arrested hundreds in a series of nationwide raids in a crackdown on



dissent, global attention on repression against the media came under sharper relief (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2013).

Before the riots, Turkey had been enjoying an economic boom and even some market liberalism. On the face of it, this had been a tribute to secularism in an Islamic state. However, scratch a little deeper and in spite of a thriving media industry (more than 40 national dailies in Istanbul, 1000 plus private radio stations and 300 or so private TV stations competing with the state broadcaster TNT and countless online news websites), one of the most insidious contemporary

campaigns against free speech has been exposed.

In spite of efforts to clean up the media scene in line with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's aspirations to join the European Union, the country's oppression against journalists has encountered international condemnation. Although a raft of reforms was ushered in, under Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, 'insulting the nation' remains a crime.

The military, Kurds and 'political Islam' are also highly sensitive issues. So much so that a robust editorial or other expression of opinion can easily land a journalist in prison.

Recent global freedom reports have cited Turkey as the world's most notorious 'media jail'—some 70 editors and reporters are reportedly still behind bars (Preston, 2013).

The situation in Turkey is interesting in the light of being cited in a new book about the importance of media in transitions to democracy. The book traces the power and media relationships in Russia and Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union, evolving democracies in Asia and the so-called Arab Spring in the Middle East. Katrin Voltmer's *The Media in Transitional Democracies* argues that the news media often 'play the role of midwife' during regime change but this doesn't necessarily mean they 'automatically' slip into a democratic role' after the fall of the old guard.

In fact, the recent wave of democratisation not only witnessed the first TV and Facebook revolutions, but also the first attempts in history to build and consolidate democratic institutions in a media-saturated environment. In the established democracies of the West, the structures and methods of operation of key institutions, such as parliaments, elections and political parties, were developed before the media became a pervasive force in everyday and political life. (Voltmer, 2013, p. 3)

In contrast, argues Voltmer, the new democracies of the late 20th and early 21st century have not gone through that process; they simply 'leapfrog' into what has been described as 'media democracy'—defined as an environment where the media's rules of the game play a vital, sometimes decisive, role in the functioning of political institutions.

In such a modern media democracy, opposition leaders battling for media freedom and freedom of expression have often been outflanked. Saturation multi-channel competition, global news flows and the internet all create a 'highly unpredictable environment for political action' (Voltmer, p. 4).

No longer can the Western model of democracy or the liberal model of Anglo-American independent media be easily transplanted to other parts of the world, regardless of how some policymakers may like to achieve this goal. There is a healthy scepticism among many non-Western nations about becoming too much like the West in political and media systems. Voltmer, of Britain's Institute of Communication Studies, says the US-led invasion of Iraq and its aftermath gave 'democracy a bad taste' and fundamental questions are being asked:

With the unprecedented spread of democracy around the world in recent

decades, the meaning of the term has become increasingly contested not only among scholars, but also among political factions and various groups of democracy activists. Is Russia a democracy? Is Turkey democratic enough to be allowed into the European Union? And is Britain becoming less democratic with the introduction of new security laws to fight terrorism? (Voltmer, 2013, p. 13)

Similar questions can be asked closer to home: Is New Zealand becoming less democratic with its controversial new Big Brother surveillance legislation allowing unfettered state spying on ordinary citizens? Does Fiji have the right to develop its own brand of post-coup democracy free from Australian and New Zealand interference? Is Samoa, which constantly castigates the Fiji military-backed regime, a genuine democracy when it has effectively been a one-party state for the past three decades and where only *matai* title holders can stand for parliamentary election?

Voltmer argues that democracy is in fact built on normative paradoxes that require ‘constant reinterpretation and readjustment’ in response to changing political environments (p. 18). She says Western democracy discourses are too focused on one pole of the debate around the paradoxes of pluralism versus unity, conflict versus consensus, and individualism versus

collectivism. Consequently a Western view frequently delegitimises conflicting democratic values.

Yet no longer are the Anglo-American views perceived as the standard-bearer of ‘good democracy’. For example, ‘Turkey has become an attractive alternative to Western-style democracy for aspiring democrats in the Middle East’, Voltmer writes (p. 21). But Turkey’s moderate secularism, booming economy and apparently successful modernisation certainly didn’t save it from the challenges of ‘people power’ seeking greater self-expression.

Voltmer argues that the news media are not democratic by nature and raises many questions about their role in democratic life (p. 24). For example, do the media have particular responsibilities, specifically during transition? Or is the very notion of a responsible press a violation of press freedom that should be rejected in the first place? These were issues debated robustly in the last edition of *Pacific Journalism Review* by Robert A. Hackett, who called for alternative and community media to campaign for just and sustainable development and media democratisation (Hackett, 2013, p. 37).

While a ‘responsibility model’ of press freedom is highly contested, the liberalist view of non-responsibility is also flawed in that it has made the

media 'vulnerable to the detrimental consequences of commercialisation and the imperatives of market demands'. And this 'dumbing down' has had a seriously negative impact on democracy in recent years.

In response to the global 'divergence of democracy' and a growing plurality of media systems and forms of journalism (witness the mounting lobby for peace journalism and deliberative journalism as responses to Asia-Pacific conflicts), Voltmer argues for greater efforts at 'de-Westernising' research (p. 227). This coupled with more comparative journalism studies is needed to face the theoretical, empirical and normative challenges confronting global media.

In *Rethinking Journalism*, Marcel Broesma and Chris Peters of the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies in The Netherlands, and their team of 16 contributors tackle these broader global issues from the perspective of how the media need to rebuild public trust if they are to play a constructive and more meaningful role in democracy.

Jo Bogaerts and Nico Carpentier write about the 'postmodern challenge to journalism', arguing that communal truth-seeking practices on the internet have dislocated traditional notions of objectivity, public service and gatekeeping. This trend may be

said to constitute a new truth claim in journalism, 'turning from claims based on objectivity to those based on authenticity' (p. 69).

Brian McNair contributes a chapter on 'trust, truth and objectivity' with strategies to sustain quality journalism in the era of the content-generating user. Ansgaard Heinrich writes about the global news exchange and the shift from 'place-based' information networks to a 'space-based' arena and a 'network society'.

Chris Atton offers an optimistic account of how alternative and activist journalism and mainstream professional journalism are interacting with the intriguing title of 'Separate, supplementary and seamless?' He calls for journalism teaching that brings traditional crafts together with alternative forms of storytelling to ask questions about power, ideology and representation.

The editors themselves call for the structural transformation of journalism as a public good. Broesma and Peters argue that instead of being hung up on a negative defence of 'what will be lost' in the current media crisis, it is better to seek new perspectives and make fundamental changes to journalism as a social and democratic institution. This involves a new dialogue contract between journalists and audiences.

Another important book, which has just been republished as a paperback, *International Journalism and Democracy*, edited by Angela Romano of Queensland University of Technology, had already made an excellent case for greater and a more 'active' commitment by journalists to democratic discourses. The book makes a compelling case for deliberative journalism—a more democratically engaged form 'mindful of consequences'. She cautions that media failure to 'look before we leap' can bring devastating consequences.

The capacity of the media to mobilise a community response is not always a force for good; it may equally unleash an inferno of tyranny and injustice. The 1994 Rwanda Genocide is an example of the living nightmare that journalism might give rein to. Rwanda's local radio and print media were used to incite hatred. (Romano, 2013, p. 3)

This could equally have applied to the so-called Arab Spring democratic surge in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, where in the former two countries, at least, a fundamentalist backlash emerged leading to further bloodshed. Syria is another example.

Romano's book offers several inspiring global case studies in deliberative journalism and various interpretations, such as American,

Australian, Finnish, Indian, Japanese and South African public journalism, civic journalism in Nigeria, citizen journalism in Colombia and Germany, public participation environmental journalism in China, and peace journalism in Indonesia. Even the 'lingering echoes' of public journalism in New Zealand get a chapter (Margie Comrie and David Venables).

Romano argues that deliberative journalism 'aims to facilitate the potential of ordinary people to influence news and political agendas' (p. 235). Thus, she says, it should help to redress the 'imbalanced representation' of women, indigenous and other minorities. And also help boost public trust in journalism and its contribution to democracy.

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