Analysis and Examination of the Audience Democracy Theory in Modern Political Communication

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Abstract

The governance of the media, the media era, mediacracy, media democracy, impartial democracy, party democracy, long-distance democracy, and public relations democracy—despite the application of these terms—still reveal a shortage of specialized terminology for defining the position of the citizen and the audience in modern political communication. In other words, scholars of communication and media sciences must answer a fundamental question: despite the presence of the majority of citizens in the new media sphere, why is the level of influence and reception of their messages by politicians so low? Can today's media democracy truly serve as the manifestation and expression of the real will of citizens, especially in instances of recourse to public opinion? In response to this question, the Franco-American scholar Bernard Manin proposed the theory of audience democracy in 1997. This article, employing a qualitative method and Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic approach, examines the theoretical foundations of this theory within the triangle of modern political communication and the discourse of neoliberalism. The preliminary contests of the 2016 U.S. elections and the emergence of the phenomenon known as "Donald Trump," who, by directly engaging with citizens and his audience through the social network Twitter, won the election, can be cited as an empirical example of populism as the greatest challenge to audience democracy. Therefore, this article will also present certain viewpoints of the opponents of audience democracy and populism.

Keywords: Audience democracy, populism, modern political communication, audience polarization

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1. Introduction

The greater the degree of freedom of action in a democratic environment, the greater the risk of the spread of populism by politicians and their media advisers (Brants & van Praag, 2006). In other words, populism and the manipulation of public

opinion by news managers and the media consultants of politicians can be the greatest challenge to an electoral event when recourse to public opinion takes place (Edelman, 1985).

In fact, the strong desire of politicians to be seen by the people, along with efforts to gain their trust, compels politicians to employ methods and deliver messages that can be considered public opinion manipulation (Edelman, 1985). Signs of some of these methods can be described as follows:

1. Personalization and self-image construction
2. Branding of one's own persona
3. Political polarization
4. Racial discrimination among citizens

To counter these techniques, taking advantage of the new opportunities made available by the emergence of information technology in the media sphere provides citizens with an innovative strategy (Castells, 1997). For example, the formation of groups or communities of like-minded individuals—people with similar preferences and ideas who, regardless of geographical or physical proximity, can share their opinions and benefit from each other's experiences—can lead to intellectual synergy, more precise understanding, and greater media literacy among audiences and citizens regarding the populist practices of politicians (Keane, 2009).

Where restrictions and the monopoly of media giants prevent the voices of ordinary people from being heard, the rise of citizen journalism or participatory media is another example of the application of audience democracy (Manin, 1997).

2. Theoretical Foundations

This study is based on hypotheses that have been raised in modern political communication and the discourse of neoliberalism (Castells, 1997). The main signifiers of this discourse are: the decline of absolutism and the demise of grand narratives, decentralization and deconstruction, and the erosion of myths and mass political parties.

Today, the era of the authoritative dominance of mass political parties—what could be described as party dictatorship—has ended, and myth-making about political figures has also declined (Keane, 2009). Decentralization and deconstruction in political and economic domains have led to increased responsibility among young people, whose orientation toward artists, economic entrepreneurs, and athletes far exceeds their interest in military figures or senators (Matthews, 2006). In this context, we witness the formation of a spiral of distrust, the decline of mass parties, the erosion of party loyalty among citizens, and the end of the era of myths and myth-making (Keane, 2009). Conversely, we are confronted with the concept of participatory democracy, which entails greater active involvement of ordinary citizens in decision-making (Keane, 2009).

Nevertheless, political distrust and the lack of political participation among the public contribute to the growing emergence of populism as the greatest challenge to postmodern democracy (Medearis, 2001). As Nadia Urbinati points out in her works, *How Populism Transforms Democracy* (Harvard University Press, 2019) and *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People* (Harvard University Press, 2014), the danger of demagoguery is present in both party democracy and representative government (Manin, 2007).

2.1. Definition of Political Communication

Political communication is a subfield of communication studies and political science that addresses how information circulates and its impact among politicians, citizens, and the media (Blumer & Alfred McLung, 1951). The model presented in Figure 1 by Pippa Norris introduces modern political communication within postmodern democracy. Additionally, the theory of the mediatization of politics between the media and politicians finds its meaning and relevance in Norris's model of political communication (Brants & van Praag, 2006).

Accordingly, Catherine Voltmer argues that this model may not be applicable to many political systems; however, in terms of theoretical and conceptual contributions, it offers a comprehensive framework for political communication (Keane, 2009).

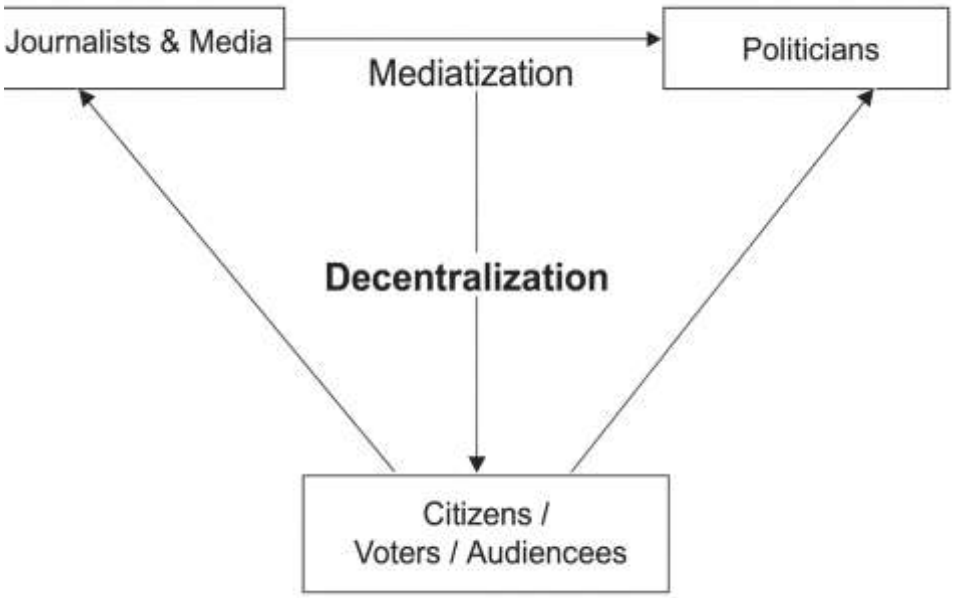

Figure 1. Structure of Modern Political Communication Based on Audience Pluralism and Decentralization

The structure of modern political communication often derives from the theories of contemporary thinkers such as Pippa Norris, Chantal Mouffe, and Bernard Manin (Manin, 1997). Contrary to the views of earlier scholars who saw political communication as a subset of political sociology focused solely on the relationship between the state and citizens, these theorists have proposed a new model comprising three components: politicians, citizens, and the media (Manin, 1997).

2.2. Definition of Audience Democracy

Audience democracy was introduced by Bernard Manin, a Franco-American theorist, in 1997 (Manin, 1997), and Nadia Urbinati, an Italian political theorist. The theory of audience democracy begins with the core elements of liberal democracy, namely:

- Free elections
- Independence for politicians elected by the people
- Freedom of expression for voters
- Free debate on public decision-making

This theory emerged in the context of transformations in the principles of liberal democracy, developments that, in historical sequence, can be traced back to the advent of parliamentarism after the bourgeois revolutions in the United States, the Netherlands, and France (Keane, 2009). Audience democracy in the West occurred after a long period of party democracy and with the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the third wave of democratization (Keane, 2009). Moreover, audience democracy emphasizes the public sphere, which requires a difficult transition away from party politics or party dictatorship. Party dictatorship refers to policies with a rigid, impenetrable core, hierarchical party structures, comprehensive and absolute membership, and a basis in social cleavages (Manin, 2007). Audience democracy, moving beyond party dominance, advances toward politics centered on audiovisual programming, campaign parties, and advocacy-driven, truth-telling news media that reflect the real pains and needs of the people (Manin, 1997).

In this section, we will briefly review the main principles and characteristics of audience democracy as derived from Bernard Manin's theories, based on a set of propositions that study the reciprocal influence between politicians and journalists (Manin, 2007). These points are also briefly outlined in Table 1.

The theory of audience democracy has four characteristics. First, without offering a general judgment on the theory, we summarize it as a developmental concept over the last two decades, from 1990 to 2010 (Keane, 2009).

To this end, we start with traditional party democracy, in which the political party was the dominant actor in the political arena, and politicians had to constantly align their actions with the fundamental principles of the party to legitimize themselves (Manin, 1997). In audience democracy, however, personal ethics, individual qualities, and competence outweigh the party's agenda and program (Manin, 2007).

In fact, the concept of audience democracy resonated as early as 1967 through Murray Edelman, who, thirty years before Manin, introduced the notion of "symbolic politics." He argued that the instrumental dimension of politics was gradually being replaced by spectacle and visual representations, with political actors using these visual symbols to communicate with audiences through the media (Edelman, 1985; Kernell, 1986).

3. Four Characteristics of Audience Democracy

First: During electoral campaigns, some candidates win votes due to public trust in their personal qualities and competence, while others, in the public sphere, manage to create an acceptable image of themselves through the help of consultants and media techniques, thereby securing votes. This duality, and the manipulation of public trust by some candidates and the media, can be labeled as the personalization of politics—especially within political parties (Manin, 1997).

Second: Political ambiguities surrounding campaign commitments—delivered in image-oriented advertisements—lead to the relative independence of politicians from the core demands of voters. Some of these ambiguities include:

- Personal promises
- Ideas developed in think tanks
- Formal yet inauthentic interactions with the public

All of these, presented under the guise of formal engagement with subcultures across different social strata, not only distance politicians from their commitments but also signal the loss of party authority, the decline of political satisfaction, and the weakening of the social contract between the people and their representatives (Keane, 2009).

Third: Freedom of expression in disseminating information has increasingly been recognized and accepted by media owners, professional journalists, and online reporters. As a result, professional journalists and influential social media figures seek to distance themselves—often quite seriously and even competitively—from the system of traditional political parties and operate independently (Brants & van Praag, 2006). Numerous surveys demonstrate that public policies with a media-centered approach have had significant impacts on people's lives and priorities, thereby creating unique constraints and incentives for politicians to assess public satisfaction. This media-centered approach allows for evaluating the degree of public acceptance of political proposals. It is characterized by the growth of media criticism, the distinction between substantive issues and propaganda, and the continuous monitoring of party government performance by social forces in the public sphere (Castells, 1997).

Fourth: In audience democracy, citizens adopt a retrospective perspective, asking themselves whether politicians have fulfilled the promises they made during the elections and whether they have honored their commitments since taking office (Manin, 2007). Conversely, leaders adopt a prospective perspective, carefully tracking voters' opinions and evaluating how they might be judged in future elections—asking, in effect, whether their efforts will be rewarded by the public (Kernell, 1986).

The general priorities and demands of citizens are not fixed; rather, they are the product of politicians' strategic plans, which are cultivated among citizens during elections through persuasive techniques and public dialogue (Edelman, 1985).

4. Research Findings

Here, the theory of audience democracy is examined through a series of testable hypotheses regarding the methods politicians employ to exercise power, maintain control, improve, and direct their position and performance in the political process. Seven hypotheses are presented.

Hypothesis 1: Political leaders—namely, party leaders, parliamentary leaders, and heads of government—in a democratic society tend to be portrayed by the media as authoritative and autonomous figures before the public, rather than as leaders

subservient to power centers such as corporate executives (Manin, 1997). They seek to be perceived as religious figures, highly skilled political experts, and well-known intellectuals with popular appeal (Keane, 2009).

If elected political leaders read their programs from scripts prepared by others and comply with the views of other power centers, audience democracy, with its inherent constraints and incentives, prevents such individuals from becoming trusted leaders. This is because they will lack the capacity to inspire and influence the audience, and audience democracy inhibits the rise of such leaders (Manin, 2007).

Hypothesis 2: The skill of "being seen" is a decisive factor. Politicians with strong competence in oratory and the ability to project themselves in public settings often attain higher political status (Brants & van Praag, 2006). When these individuals enter electoral campaigns, they often emerge victorious and become future political leaders. Such figures resist the constraints of party hierarchy and party dictatorship, and even if they suddenly lose everything in these competitions and are excluded from the political arena, they frequently re-enter politics through high-profile media engagement—publishing books, writing newspaper columns, appearing on talk shows, and skillfully rebuilding connections with prominent journalists (Castells, 1997).

Without such media capabilities, citizens cannot easily achieve political goals unless they establish dedicated campaigns to compensate for their lack of media presence. Nevertheless, performance in the public sphere—especially through television—has become so important that politicians lacking this "visibility" skill are likely to disappear from public life in the short term and vanish entirely in the long term (Keane, 2009).

Hypothesis 3: The new generation of politicians is no longer drawn from veterans of the military, civil service, judiciary, economy, or seasoned journalism. Instead, they emerge from among professionals in economic services, television presenters and journalists, media owners, film actors, pop musicians, famous athletes, celebrities, and young entrepreneurs (Manin, 1997). As a result, younger politicians have fewer roots in traditional social values and are less likely to adhere to hierarchical structures (Keane, 2009).

Hypothesis 4: Maintaining a constant and visible presence before audiences in the media sphere has reduced the necessity for politicians to connect with retired political, party, or even military leaders (Manin, 2007). Instead, they focus on maximizing their television presence. Leveraging knowledge and skills gained from media training, targeted group outreach, media monitoring, and other electoral research, they consistently strive to refine their media image. By surrounding themselves with media experts and news managers and relying on their specialized input, politicians work to shape and enhance their public relations, with the aim of preserving authority and performance consistent with expectations of political leadership (Brants & van Praag, 2006).

Hypothesis 5: Political leaders are increasingly becoming directors of staged performances. They are involved in preparing scripts that offer a credible portrayal of their personal qualities, address current social issues, highlight political and social divisions, and then propose solutions aimed at winning citizens' votes (Edelman, 1985).

Hypothesis 6: Political parties engage in what might be called "news management" or, more pointedly, "news manipulation" to influence and control journalistic content (Kernell, 1986).

The media may be managed through direct involvement of media owners, editors, and reporters, as well as through unofficial news summaries and deliberate news placement by journalists. This can also occur through organizational strategies such as dedicating a news management unit to a specific department, leaking information to reward certain journalists, framing topics in a particular way, bypassing media regulations, or shaping ambiguous narratives through media consultants.

Similarly, images are managed much like news, often via advertising or appearances on popular television shows that signal detachment from politics—or even an anti-politics stance. Common techniques include pairing humanitarian storylines with a likable public image of the favored party or candidate, thereby steering public perception in a desired direction (Edelman, 1985).

Hypothesis 7: Politicians who formulate or control public policies are increasingly dependent on the flow of news and information provided by investigative journalists, rather than relying on party-based information sources such as party members, local branches, interest groups, intra-party communications, or governmental resources like civil servants (Brants

& van Praag, 2006). The media are the primary source of information about the daily lives and shared perspectives of ordinary citizens, as well as voters and politically engaged individuals (Castells, 1997).

For opportunistic politicians, moments when party leadership is under suspicion due to political scandals or negative press are among the most challenging, making access to media-sourced information critical (Keane, 2009). In any case, politicians must come to terms with their informational dependence on journalists—a dependence that, while necessary, can pose challenges to their authority and to their quasi-narcissistic self-image as political leaders (Manin, 2007).

Table 1. Influential Signifiers in Political Communication Between Politicians, Journalists, and Citizens

Politicians and Audiences	Journalists and Audiences
Political leaders tend to be presented by the media as central and autonomous figures before audiences.	Journalists and other media system actors in democratic societies prefer to present themselves as autonomous and independent individuals rather than as subordinates to politicians or power holders.
Politicians with strong public appeal and visibility in public events and social networks tend to be ultimate winners in electoral contests.	Journalists and other media actors prefer to appear as a distinct and independent power separate from government and other power centers.
Elected representatives often come from among artists, economic activists, entrepreneurs, and athletes, with fewer roots in party traditions.	In a civil society, journalists and other media actors are part of an overall shift in political communication and political participation from the realm of the state to the public sphere, and from party logic toward media logic in audience democracy.
Politicians, to achieve their goals, prefer strong television presence over face-to-face interaction with the public.	Journalists and other media actors are increasingly engaged in a process combining interpretation, investigation, and entertainment.
Politicians depend on media exposure and journalists to maintain visibility.	Journalists and other media actors attempt to influence and shape politicians' choices through interpretive and entertainment-oriented approaches, and also rely on politicians for access to news.
Political parties attempt to influence and control journalism.	Journalists and other media actors attempt to influence and set the agenda of political discussions through agenda-setting techniques.
Politicians are compelled to cope with informational dependence on journalists.	In televised debates and political discussions, journalists often hold the upper hand through the use of various techniques.

5. Critics of Audience Democracy

As noted, the greatest challenge to audience democracy is populist manipulation of audiences by media managers and political leaders. Visual symbols, celebrity presence, and the use of symbolic politics are tools that make it possible to shift audience opinions even in a supposedly free exchange. Kristen Arcaliens, in her research article *From Party Democracy to Audience Democracy: The Role of Mass Media in Modern Populism* (Arcaliens, 2021), refers to Donald Trump's 2017 interview in which he boasted about his high ratings for appearances on Sunday morning shows, highlighting his narcissism. She notes that Trump leveraged slogans such as:

- White supremacism
- Disparagement of feminism
- Cult of personality

These allowed him to fully exploit the tools of audience democracy and manipulate public opinion.

We can see populism as a model used by politicians across the political spectrum to amplify divisive rhetoric and polarize citizens. Trump succeeded in taking control of the Republican Party without political experience and against the wishes of many influential members. His ability to connect directly with supporters via Twitter played a critical role in his nomination.

In contrast to Max Weber's notion of charisma as an almost mystical and divine force, Trump's charismatic influence was partly a product of his celebrity status, media-driven motivations, and the growing importance of celebrities in politics, as well as his experience as a television star.

Analysis of the 2016 U.S. election shows Trump using a fully populist style, Bernie Sanders a populist–pluralist style, and Hillary Clinton an elitist–pluralist style. Comparing these three personal style profiles reveals undeniable similarities and differences.

For example, Clinton's relative weakness in 2016 largely stemmed from her attempt to project both elitism and pluralism simultaneously. Socially, she sometimes used populist expressions and apologized for arriving late or not having time to socialize (elitist signaling), while also portraying herself as an ordinary woman shopping for groceries like "Black and Latina sisters" (populist/pluralist signaling). This simultaneous presentation of two identities appeared problematic to audiences.

6. Importance of Audience Democracy

Some propose the concept of moderate democracy as an alternative to party democracy and, in this context, criticize audience democracy. Critics claim audience democracy produces a 21st-century system in which the votes of the middle class are mediated by moderate politicians and journalists. Given the constant rivalry between these two groups, public satisfaction with policy outcomes is often limited.

Factor One: Unexpected political dissatisfaction and public distrust toward the electoral system in Western democracies. Confidence in government, political parties, and politicians reached historic lows, and political cynicism—public doubt about leaders' capacity to solve problems—was both high and growing.

Factor Two:

- Political issues in audience democracy vs. middle-class democracy
- Political figures in audience democracy vs. middle-class democracy

The key question is which of these two factors plays the greater role in shaping evaluations of political performance. Prominent politicians overwhelmingly see themselves as exceptional individuals and, to achieve high public approval, employ professional media experts to send this message to audiences and supporters: "We are statesmen who can lead society in times of crisis" (grand narratives). Such claims, however, often appear inflated to neutral observers, envious rivals, and discontented voters.

These leaders in audience democracy are often outwardly devout, well-trained, yet professionally deceptive.

Recent studies have revisited earlier portrayals of Ronald Reagan as a simple-minded president, instead portraying him as a statesman who ended the Cold War through innovative interactions—earning the title "father of audience democracy." Tony Blair provides another example: despite being his party's most prominent candidate, his role in initiating the Iraq War, his indebtedness to and alignment with Margaret Thatcher, and the post-Saddam quagmire all created lasting doubts among civil servants, voters, and political commentators about his claims to statesmanship.

Rejecting the notion of a "media dictatorship" is easier than rejecting the idea of a governmental dictatorship. Theoretically, media dictatorship in audience democracy is implausible because the commercialization and innovation of active news media in monitoring government actions have broken state monopolies over political information. Empirically, the theory is unsupported: comparing the power and control political leaders exerted over news during the "golden age" of party democracy (1945–1975) to the current phase of audience democracy shows a clear decline.

7. Conclusion

News management and symbolic politics during the 2016 U.S. presidential election, as used by Donald Trump in his interaction with media and voters, were firmly grounded in populist components, including:

- Confronting feminist movements with patriarchal rhetoric throughout debates and campaigns
- Attracting middle-class and undecided voters through broad, vague, and idealistic promises
- Mythologizing the candidate in the eyes of the middle class through political consultants and public opinion managers
- Opposing elitism while emphasizing the will of the people through idealistic slogans

In line with the overall ethical framework of political communication, it is assumed that well-institutionalized parties can mobilize ordinary citizens, unite diverse viewpoints toward the public interest, and recruit new and competent individuals for parliamentary and governmental positions. Similarly, well-institutionalized media can provide a platform for all voices, hold politicians accountable, monitor legislative decision-making, and inform the public about complex and opaque governmental actions.

According to this ethical doctrine, the two pillars of the civil society's public sphere—parties and the press—do not form separate branches of government but instead help genuine branches of governance grow by reflecting problems along with legitimate criticism.

Researchers should avoid idealized portrayals of post–Cold War party democracy and refrain from creating fictionalized scenarios about possible futures, such as mythologizing figures to manipulate public opinion. Media professionals and

communication scholars should regard audience democracy as a potentially sustainable, though still immature, political communication system, focusing on empirical evidence and performance records to date.

Since 1975, the environment for collective action and news gathering in Western societies has fundamentally changed: campaigns have replaced mass-membership parties, and innovative party leaders now strive to form teams of loyal politicians, financial backers, grassroots volunteers, media experts, and political consultants. After electoral victory, these campaign structures not only continue their functions but also seek to influence and oversee public policy.

Today, mass media operate as fully professional, commercial organizations with segmented marketing strategies. They recruit a wide range of political actors—often from diverse social backgrounds—who possess the capacity to influence and alter government policy, sometimes beyond the reach of formal party structures.

Media outlets seek to capitalize on political news values while aligning journalistic standards with audience preferences, which have become increasingly diverse, critical, and split between entertainment and information.

In election periods, within such a variable and diverse public opinion landscape, some party leaders attempt to set the media agenda, while conversely, some media owners try to shape the agendas of political parties. Perhaps the most prominent result of modern political communication in public spheres is the shared focus of all participants—even the most powerful—on citizens' concerns and vital needs, thereby enhancing governmental effectiveness and legitimizing the democratic order.

Ethical Considerations

All procedures performed in this study were under the ethical standards.

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Conflict of Interest

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