

BOOK REVIEW: DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA DECADENCE
(2013).BY JOHN KEANE.CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS*

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Abstract

This piece of writing attempts to review the book *Democracy and Media Decadence* authored by John Keane who is an eminent Professor of Politics at the University of Sydney and the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin. The book is a well written guide to understand the gradual development of media with the emergence of internet as a mode of communication, also termed as the phase of 'Communication Abundance' wherein all the various modes of communication have become overlapping and interlinked. The book focusses on discussing the role of media in the working of a democracy. Over the years media has played a significant role in a number of events that have left an impact globally like the Arab spring that spread like fire, to which the media played a catalyst. Another such major event which put the role of the media in spotlight is the most recent Presidential Elections in the United States of America. The same is an excellent specimen of how the media influences the decision making of the masses. The author talks of communication abundance in the initial chapters of the book whereas in the succeeding chapters he focuses on the dark side of this communication abundance, also termed as 'media decadence' and the impact of the same on the governance in the various political systems all over the world. The book forms a very good read for the people interested in the area of polity and media governance.

The book 'Democracy and Media Decadence' by John Keane¹, is a guide to understand the evolution of communication and media technology over the last century and its impact on the society at large and development of the institution of democracy in particular. The book is a step forward from his earlier publications, *Violence and Democracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), and the highly acclaimed *The Life and Death of*

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Democracy (2009) which are also on the same subject. The book is an attempt to evaluate how this decay of media has become fatal for the smooth functioning of a democracy.

Communicative abundance and democracy are thought of as conjoined twins. Today with rise of the media, its quality has fallen to a great extent due to a number of reasons, leading to a decadence which in turn has led to a number of fundamental implications on the politics. The stunning revolutionary process and product innovations happening in the fields of communications has fuelled the dispersal and public accountability of power affecting not only the state at large but also people at an individualistic level.

The Author in order to study the gradual rise in the media and communication mechanism and its impact on the democracy has divided the book into five chapters very effectively. Each chapter deals with different aspects of media and its intervention with democracy. He starts with a discussion on how with the changing times the modes of communication have changed. Long gone are the days when worldwide Satellite television broadcasts were viewed by over 400 million people in large groups to today in the era of Facebook, when we have ended up living isolated lives. Today, people around the globe have become so dependent on multimedia that they have forgotten the old habits of digging the morning newspapers leading to a striking change in their life styles. Internet portals have become their favourite destination for all the purposes. According to him the shift towards multimedia platforms and user – generated communications involves many more people listening, watching and talking directly to other people, rather than to traditional media sources.

He says that this revolutionary age of communicative abundance is structured by a new world system of overlapping and interlinked media devices. Due to this evolution the age of digital democracy, cybercitizens and e-government has emerged. In the words of Micah L. Sifry, co-founder of the Personal Democracy Forum “we now live in an age of abundant public energies, in addition to abundant information’ because ‘abundant information, connectivity and time are just the technical ingredients needed to foster an explosion of civic activity.”²

² Pierre Omidyar, *Connecting People*, Bloomberg Business Week (2005); BILL GATES, *BUSINESS @ THE SPEED OF THOUGHT: USING A DIGITAL NERVOUS SYSTEM* (1999); MICAH L. SIFRY, *WIKILEAKS AND THE AGE OF TRANSPARENCY* 62 (2011)

This phenomenon of communicative abundance has brought in a number of trends namely democratization of information, narrowing of the private-public distinction and muckracking. Through the emergence of digital democracy, online publics, cyber citizens and wiki government there has been a sudden rise in the access to published materials previously unavailable to public or formally available only to restricted circles of users which can be called as democratization of information. The emergence of media has blurred the lines between the private and public. Today private battles are constantly fought, lost and won. In the age of 'cookies' even the internet behavior of a private person is constantly under scanner leading to no such thing as 'private'. Finally, the author talks of the muck racking which is a high intensity effort by citizens, journalists and monitory institutions to bombard power holders with public exposure leading to public shamming.

Another concept which has emerged is that of Monitory Democracy, the word that he coined in one of his previous books, *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009). It means the ongoing public scrutiny and control of decision makers, that is, the Government. In contrast to the earlier eras of assembly democracy and representative democracy in territorial state form, many new mechanisms have evolved with new ways of publicly monitoring and controlling the exercise of power. Thus media has played a significant role in coming up of monitory democracy and its functioning. Various new methods of controlling like media scrutiny, scams, debates, cross border parliament has changed the meaning of democracy today. It is the age of surveys, focus groups, deliberative polling, online petitions and audience customers voting.

The author says that the new monitory democracy has replaced the old rule of 'one person, one vote, one representative' by 'one person, many interests, many voices, multiple votes, multiple representatives'. The second chapter has been dedicated to the study of the concept of monitory democracy, its need and what led to its emergence. Furthermore how communicative abundance has helped it. It says that in the era of monitory democracy, all institutions in the business of scrutinizing power rely heavily on these media innovations, and thus communicative abundance has played a significant role in the functioning of this new kind of democratic institution.

The question that the author has raised is that should we be happy about this emergence of organized leaking of information,

or be worried by the growth of new forms of digital surveillance. According to him on one hand, all the big public issues that have ever erupted around the world like civil rights for women and minorities, opposition to nuclear weapons etc. have been generated not by political parties, elections, legislatures and governments, but principally by power monitoring networks that run parallel parliamentary representation. But at the same time further he puts light on the negative effects of emergence of media also which he calls 'Decadence'.

The third chapter talks of Media Decadence. Decadence is a process and whether the decadent trends around to be summarized prove fatal for democratic energies around the world is treated as an open question. And this book basically emphasizes the contingency and reversibility of the same.

"It takes more than bytes to foster, install and consolidate a healthy democratic regime".

It is further said that internet is simply a tool in the hands of power, usable by any hand, it also follows that in contexts such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Belarus, Turkmenistan and Venezuela the new galaxy of communications media actually 'empowers the strong and dis-empowers the weak'.³ Thus conjecture of this book is the techniques and tools of media saturated societies are being used by powerful forces in ways that are having harmful effects on democracy.

In words of the author, "media decadence refers to the wide gaps that are opening up between the rosy ideals of free and fair public contestation and chastening of power, the unforced plurality of opinions and public commitment of representatives to the inclusion and treatment of all citizens as equal, even in cross border settings, loosely speaking, the ideals of monitory democracy.....fostering the blind acceptance of the way things are heading".⁴

This decay in media, interchangeably used with 'information cascades' is leading to mob like behavior of the citizens who are ill informed making them narcissistic narrow mindedness. The democracy which was once marked by well aware masses is being symbolized by narrow- minded, ignorant and suggestible subjects.

³ EVGENY MOROZOV, THE NET DELUSION: THE DARK SIDE OF INTERNET FREEDOM 16-17 (2011).

⁴ JOHN KEANE, DEMOCRACY AND MEDIA DECADENCE 119 (Cambridge University Press) (2013)

The author while discussing the downfall of the media talks of the effect the advertisements have on youth, the damage that hacking, sabotaging the security of the nations.

Further, in a striking contrast to a mediocracy, the author in the fourth chapter talks of the Democracy's Opponents in which he discusses China which is one of the emerging superpowers today. The second largest economy and the greatest carbon polluter is a living example of state control over media. The state of affairs of China are such that the China Central Television (CCTV) the only country wide network and the sole purchaser of overseas programmes is subjected to strict dual control by the Propaganda Department and the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television. Similar is the functioning of the radio programming and the print media which is always under a constant scanner.

A system drawing on router technology has been used to block undesirable chunks of information from the outside world also known as the Great Firewall of China. The latest internet trends like Facebook and Twitter are also blocked in China though their local counterparts thrive thus cutting the country from the rest of the world. Though due to protests the government regulations have lessened but still some sympathetic observers liken the Chinese authorities to skilled doctors equipped with surveillance equipment and various tools for the 'continuous tuning' of the body politic.⁵ Existence such conditions to a great extent lead to killing the whole meaning of democracy and thus haven't been appreciated.

The last chapter, *Why freedom of public communication?* discusses why the freedom of communication is actually needed although proven to be fatal for the functioning of a government many a times. The author states that freedom of expression is required for civic, social and political life and indispensable for democracy, is the way things are typically put, with more than a touch of tautology.⁶

The freedom of communication is much needed because of a number of reasons. First it works against the arbitrary use of power which is fuelled by one's own selfish motives disregard the interest of others. The arbitrary power is unpredictable power, its unconstrained quality means that it can be spitefully, according to whim, changing direction at will, exacting revenge on its

⁵ *Id.* at 208

⁶ *Id.* at 215

victims.⁷ The author feels that free communication can serve to dissolve these fears. The freedom is a constructive implication which serves the more positive cause of reminding others of the importance of fostering the dignity of citizens.

It is further said that absence of monitory democracy can be catastrophic. Zero accountability of the government towards its people can lead to misadventures that can take us backwards in time. The big powers gone wrong have the potentiality to harm the whole humanity. Thus public silence can kill the spirit and substance of monitory democracy. The author cites a number of examples like that of Deepwater Horizon catastrophe in which the British petroleum malpractices were exposed through the Law Courts and the company itself has launched a rudimentary programme of town hall meetings for its employees and managers. Such events stress over the need for freedom to communication as opposed to silence. It is said that the wise citizens can help greatly to build procedures designed to govern democratically during emergencies, as in the mutual aid networks of rural Saskatchewan.⁸

Finally he ends by saying that media is the common thread which scrutinizes and restrains the arbitrary power and also that the revolution in favour of communication abundance is in no way over.

The book is a comprehensive account of the key debates on media and its effects whether positive and negative on functioning of a democracy. The book has been well illustrated with the 21st century concepts like cloud computing, Google books, kindle, I phone applications etc to convey to the readers how the change in the technologies have brought a difference in the mind sets of the people. In one of such discussions he says that now even “the couch potato” seems to be a figure from the distant past. The book makes up a very good read for the people interested in political science and would add to any one’s knowledge about how over the years freedom of expression and media has affected working of a state. It is hoped that the author being one of the celebrated political philosophers of the time comes up with more of such knowledgeable works.



⁷ *Id.* at 220

⁸ ELAINE SCARRY, THINKING IN AN EMERGENCY (2011).