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All political communication is hybrid: A conversation with Andrew Chadwick about his latest book "The Hybrid Media System: Politics and Power"

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All political communication is hybrid

A conversation with Andrew Chadwick about his latest book "The Hybrid Media System. Politics and Power" (Oxford University Press, 2013)

By Augusto Valeriani

Abstract

The article is a transcript of a conversation with Andrew Chadwick about his latest book "The Hybrid Media System. Politics and Power" (Oxford University Press, 2013). Andrew Chadwick is professor of Political Science and Co-Director of the New Political Communication Unit in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Royal Holloway, University of London. Starting from the thesis developed in the book, Chadwick argues that we should stop studying digital and older media "in isolation"; on the contrary, according to the British scholar, it is time to adopt "hybridity" as a guiding principle for reconfiguring our understanding of contemporary media systems.

The conversation took place at Royal Holloway, University of London on the 7th of March, 2014.

Augusto Valeriani: *Your book is first of all a call for a rethink of political communication. Even before focusing on transformations in contemporary media systems, it seems to me that you invite the community of political communication scholars to completely redefine their patterns of thought in approaching the study of media and politics in Western Democracies. You explicitly argue that the diffusion of new communication technologies creates the need for a new attitude that you define as "hybrid thinking." What exactly is this "hybrid thinking"?*

Andrew Chadwick: Hybrid thinking is essentially a scholarly disposition. It is about studying political communication not in terms of "*either/or"* thinking and hard distinctions and dualisms; it is about adopting a "*not only, but also"* approach.

As a scholar of the internet and politics for the last 14 years I have become increasingly frustrated with the assumptions that became embedded in the literature. Everybody was taking sides: you had the "everything changes" camp on the one side and you had the "nothing changes" camp on the other side. Also, when the internet came along, it was almost like people wanted to start saying: "there is a blank slate and we are going to start from scratch with a new sets of ideas about digital media."

In the early 2000s we had this huge explosion of internet scholarship and it was a very exciting time. But by the end of the 2000s I started to feel uncomfortable with studying digital media in isolation. I started to become fascinated by the processes of adaptation among older media. I don't mean only the technology, I mean all of the nebulous of practices that surround media. Today I see media in a very holistic sense. It is not just the technology itself, it's the socio-economic, political and cultural practices that surround technology as it becomes embedded in our everyday political lives.

I started my work for this book from a huge literature review on hybridity as a concept across the social sciences, involving works from disciplines as wide-ranging as geography, management studies, political science, obviously, sociology and also actor-network theory as a branch of science and technology studies—Latour's notion of hybrid networks, the idea that the interaction between technology and humans creates the conditions for agency in hybrid networks.

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Augusto Valeriani: *Studying newer and older media together and adopting a holistic approach to investigating contemporary political communication ecosystems means simultaneously considering different media logics at work. Such a hybrid approach also implies recognizing the new centrality of television, and even of newspapers, in political communication. This idea seems to contradict the research trend of focusing exclusively on the internet that has emerged during the last ten years, and especially after the Obama campaign in 2008. How is the relationship between older and newer media changing political communication and what effects is this having on the behavior of actors involved in it?*

Andrew Chadwick: In this regard I borrow quite heavily from the mediatization literature which stresses the shaping of politics through media logics. These logics can be observed in people's behavior and they can be seen in the way media technology affordances enable and disable types of behavior. When you study political communication—in newsrooms, in campaigns, or elsewhere—what you find is a whole range of behaviors associated with adaptation, renewal and integration. It is not only about saying: "This is a new world, we all have to be online, we all have to be on Twitter" for example. It is also about considering the renewal of television.

For example, if we look at the data on television viewership in the two countries I'm most familiar with—the United States and the United Kingdom—we see that scheduled TV news viewing is still supremely important. Although the internet has emerged as a major source of news, mass broadcast television remains supremely popular.

In the UK and the US the two big moments in democratic life of the last few years—the presidential election in the US in 2008 and the general election in the UK in 2010—were both marked by the continued relevance of television. In the 2010 general election in Britain, television reasserted its dominance with the first-ever live broadcast televised debates. The debates dominated the entire campaign, punctuating it in a way that broadcast media have never been able to achieve before in this country. Obviously the internet was part of the picture but, importantly, its use was integrated with the television experience.

In the USA, perhaps more controversially, I argue for a revisionist interpretation of the Barack Obama 2008 campaign. We all got caught up by the Obama phenomenon, and that model of online campaigning has rightly been celebrated as genuinely pioneering. But the problem is that a lot of scholars, myself included, in that moment thought: "Right, what's really new about all of this is the internet". But if you actually look back at the literature that had emerged three or four years on from the campaign; if you look at the details and if you read the insider accounts of people like David Plouffe and David Axelrod you get a much more complex picture. And the picture is not only one in which online campaigning revolutionizes American politics. It is also about the integration of elite newspapers, television, and the internet.

For example, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* were hugely important during that campaign in ways that have been neglected, in particular in destroying the reputation of Republican Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Although at the time there was an obsession with comedian Tina Fey and the viral circulation of satire from the television show *Saturday Night Live*, it was the investigative reporting by the *Post* and the *Times* that laid the foundations for that satirical treatment.

Another example of my revisionist view of Obama for America is the huge amount of money that the campaign spent on television advertising, far more than any previous campaign. Few observers picked this up at the time. Instead, attention was focused on MyBarackObama.com. The online social network was undoubtedly important, but, again, what really mattered in

Obama's 2008 campaign was the integration of social media, television media, and the ground campaign.

Augusto Valeriani: *The notion of a media system is definitely not new in political communication studies. However in the book you adopt a specific vision of media systems, one where instability, interactions and even conflict are presented as crucial for the existence of the system itself. More specifically you argue that "systems are always in the process of becoming" and consider the actions of subjects inhabiting them as responsible for this "never-ending" process of "system building." Could you describe how, according to your vision, the action of subjects in the fields of media and politics is transforming contemporary media systems by hybridizing them?*

Andrew Chadwick: If we pay attention to political communication as it takes places across and between the boundaries between older and newer media, than this requires that we think in terms of systems. Systems thinking is very interesting, but it has had a "bad press," if I can use that term. Early work on political communication from the 1950s onward borrowed from functionalist sociology, in particular the work of Talcott Parsons and the idea that a system creates stability. A lot of this work was written during the Cold War era, when Western social scientists in particular were keen to demonstrate how societies hold together just as Marxists were arguing that they were based on conflict.

Recently a different type of systems thinking has emerged. You have authors like Brian McNair whose great book *Cultural Chaos: Journalism and Power in a Globalized World* talks about the non-linear, chaotic aspects of systems and the fact that systems are not necessarily about the resolution of conflict. Societies can accommodate conflict but in a context of broader interdependence among actors in order to get things done, to pursue social goals. Another aspect of this new kind of systems thinking is the idea that systems are consciously built; they don't just emerge. Relationships between social actors create the system.

For example, in the chapter of my book on WikiLeaks, I argue that WikiLeaks is not a singular entity that exists in isolation from professional journalism or from a broader network of hacktivists and "ordinary" political activists, but instead it needs to be understood as a phenomenon created through interdependence. Interdependent relationships between a wide range of different social actors created a hybrid entity that, in turn, laid the foundations of a hybrid system, a context for further action.

The concept of the hybrid media system captures the outcome but it also tries to capture the social interactions that create the system itself. Actors who play important roles in building a system are more able to capitalize on its logics and exercise power. Again, Obama in 2008 was an excellent example of this. The campaign set out to build a system that integrated older and newer media logics and they were then able to capitalize on it. The same goes for WikiLeaks and the relationships between the journalists at the *Guardian* (and the other newspapers involved) and Assange and his band of supporters. They built a system for organizing their practice and this laid the foundations on which they could all work. Even today if you look at the way the *Guardian* has behaved with the Edward Snowden NSA leak, those practices could not have existed without the WikiLeaks practices that came before them.

If you have a role in laying the foundations you are also able to behave more powerfully in what follows.

Augusto Valeriani: *I think that this vision of media systems implies also a new understanding*

of power relationships and of power in general. The empirical research that you present in the book clearly shows how, within hybrid media systems, there are new paths for acquiring and losing influence, together with new opportunities for conflict but also and cooperation.

Also, it seems to me that, on the one hand, you argue against those who suggest that digital media don't affect the previous balance of power in political communication and, on the other hand, against those who describe the current situation as beginning characterised by the simple emergence of new groups that were previously excluded from power. This interpretation is based on the concept of interdependence that you frequently recall in the book. What do you mean by interdependence and how does it affect balances of power within the hybrid media system?

Andrew Chadwick: Ontologically, the hybrid media system is a way of seeing the world that privileges complexity and interdependence. It discusses power but it says that power cannot always be understood in simple hegemonic forms. Power is complex and its role varies from context to context.

I am not a scholar of international relations but I have long found Robert Kehoane and Joseph Nye's classic work on asymmetrical interdependence to be fascinating. For me, the key insight here is that people and groups of all kinds may appear to be relatively powerless in one context, but if you put them in another context, suddenly the situation has shifted and they are able to be powerful, and act powerfully. We see this daily with how interventions using social media now work in news cycles.

Another influence on my thinking is legal scholar David Singh Grewal's book *Network Power* which moves away from many of the theories of power that have been influential in communication studies. The norms and practices of a network makes individuals want to join it and have access to the network power to be found in co-operative relationships. In communication studies power has often been wrapped up with hegemony, with the notion that there are hegemonic forces that are expressions of the capitalist system or of state power. However, the problem with this approach is that we end up answering a lot of the questions in advance. This is not a new criticism. On the contrary, I think that the digital media environment has created the need for a much more complex understanding of power relations between political actors.

For example, I don't think it's easy to translate Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's "manufacturing consent" paradigm to the contemporary era. Also, at the moment there is a rather pessimistic body of work emerging, a critical political economy interpretation of social media. I think it, too, is in danger of answering all the questions in advance, because it says that digital media are all about exploitation and adherence to the all-dominating logics of capitalism.

In contrast, one of the many breakthroughs of Manuel Castells, whose writing has been very inspirational for me, is that he has managed to show what he calls "counterpower" at work in the network society. Across all of his work he hasn't taken the easy route of saying: "actually, it is the old guys—big media, political elites, big companies, military powers—always calling the shots." Often, of course, that is the case! But Castells also stresses how power works in much more complex and multifaceted ways. We can apply this breakthrough by thinking in terms of power and interdependence at all levels of politics. Interdependence is, in my view, a helpful concept because it asks that we study political communication *in flow*.

Augusto Valeriani: *Nowadays, many journalists, practitioners and scholars are intrigued by*

the opportunities offered by digital tools to scrape and analyze large amounts of data related to people's behavior online. This is especially true when it comes to social media analyses. In this regard I think we might call this a sort of "big data obsession."

In this book, however, you reject such approaches and, instead of adopting quantitative methods, you present the results of what could be described as micro-ethnographies. I think this choice is really important because it shows the value of qualitative approaches for studying social media, as well as the broader media and political spheres. Could you describe the reasons behind your methodological choices? Should we consider "live ethnography," as you call it in the book, the most appropriate method to study hybrid media systems?

Andrew Chadwick: Ethnography is one of the methods I chose, but another important one is narrative storytelling. In studying these big political moments, whether it is a TV debate or the deconstruction of a story like WikiLeaks or an election campaign, we need to try to get inside the moment in real time and look at the interdependence among older and newer media logics and practices. We need to tell stories about how these things work.

You can do this to some extent with "big data" methods. I have nothing against big data methods but, for me, it is more fruitful to try and get inside these moments and tell the story of what happened. With regard to traditional ethnography, it is appealing to say that we should use "pure" digital methods to study digital environments rather than adapt older methods. But that, again, goes down the road of the *either/or*: either you adopt methods that are completely digitally native or you use the "old ways." I think we need both approaches.

The live ethnography I present in the book, the analysis of the first UK prime ministerial debates and the "Bullygate" scandal (regarding Gordon Brown's alleged mistreatment of colleagues working inside his office in Number 10, Downing Street), really fascinated me. With bullygate we have a story that came out of nowhere and faded away a matter of three or four days because of the way the hybrid assemblage of news making actors worked. What I try to show in the Bullygate case study, sometimes at a very micro level—often down to the level of single tweets—is how the framing and eventually the dominant understanding of a news story emerges collaboratively between journalists, activists and senior political figures, across and between older and newer media.

One of the things that is really useful about ethnography is that it begins from the assumption that a person is embedded in some way in a particular culture. If you go back and read the classic works of ethnography like Clifford Geertz's, for instance, what he argued is that you must establish some kind of preliminary understanding of the context you are investigating.

One problem with big data in the social sciences is the pursuit of methods that supposedly everybody can agree on and anybody can use. There is the idea that if only we had technically and technologically "better" methods anyone could derive findings of significance as long as they know how to run the software, so to speak. In one sense this is attractive, because it is like lab-based experimental science where the conditions are controlled. But the great strength of ethnography and qualitative methods more generally is that you have to begin from the assumption that the person doing the analysis needs to know the basic contours of the media and political system that they are operating in.

This is why I think we need to be careful in comparative work not to abstract away from what we need to know to get to grips with what is really going on in political communication. Although it has nothing to say about digital media, the great strength of a comparative book like Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini's *Comparing Media Systems* is that it doesn't make that mistake, it doesn't abstract away—they have a lot of historical detail and the conceptual models act as heuristics to guide the assembly of evidence.

Empirical scholars who do cross-national statistics-driven research will probably not like my book. However, hopefully it will be seen as one way to generate rich and contextually specific studies of the tumultuous changes we are currently living through in political communication.