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Keane, John - *Democracy and Media Decadence*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 255 (Paperback) ISBN 9781107614574

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John Keane probably did not aim to have his readers LOL (laugh out loud) while reading his erudite tome, *Democracy and Media Decadence*. And yet, for those scholars trying to keep ahead of digitally savvy students, there might be a mild chortle as they nod in agreement with those Keane describes as 'empirically unsound, and yet best-selling authors', who write:

“ My concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that use to come naturally has become a struggle (Nicholas Carr, 2008, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?' in Keane, 2013 pp.135-136). ”

It will be no surprise to readers of Keane's earlier works – particularly the 992-page *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009) – that deep thinking is indeed necessary when considering the ideas that he puts forward. This is a sharper book (256 pages), but it also deals with weighty issues in its five chapters entitled: 'Communicative abundance'; 'Monitory democracy'; 'Media decadence'; 'Democracy's opponents'; and 'Why freedom of public communication?' Each chapter provides insight into Keane's prodigious intellect as he meanders thoughtfully from the ancient Greeks through to Isaac Asimov and breaking news on Twitter. As Michael Schudson states: 'Keane doesn't answer all your questions ... – but he makes it impossible to credit those who pretend to' (fourth cover).

'Communicative abundance' is exactly as it sounds – the concept that we are surrounded by an abundance of communication which overlaps and interlinks. It is important to note, as Keane has done, that not all have access to this abundance. There are still great digital divides based on differences of age, gender, class ethnicity and disability. Keane also recognises that although the age of communicative abundance has been heralded by some with great hope, it is, like previous communication revolutions, destined to 'produce fickle fantasies and dashed expectations' (9) as it fails to 'overcome language barriers, racist and national hatreds, untamed corporate power and all other ills of our time' (Curran in Keane, 20).

Keane urges scholars to look at the digital communications tools that have taken root within institutions, and consider what new power dynamics and effects these tools are having on the world:

“ In the emergent world of communicative abundance, a whole new mental effort is required to make sense of how democracies in general regions of the world are being shaped and reshaped by the new tools and rhetoric of communication – and why our very thinking about democracy must also change (25). ”

The chapter 'Monitory democracy' returns to the concept he introduced in his earlier book *The Life and Death of*

Democracy. Monitory democracy refers to the extent to which democracy is being increasingly monitored. Keane argues there are a growing number of monitory institutions (far beyond the muckraking newspapers) – committed to providing the public with better information about the performance of government and non-government bodies across international borders.

“ Whether in the field of local, national or super national government, or in the world of business and other NGOs and networks, some of them stretching down into the roots of everyday life in outwards towards the four corners of the earth, people and organisations and exercise power and now routinely subject to public monitoring and public contestation by an assortment of extra-parliamentary bodies (81). ”

He notes that in a monitory democracy, communicative abundance gives the global public the opportunity be representative in more than one way. While those living in a representative democracy will be members of an electorate, they are also represented by virtue of being members of school communities, church communities, sporting clubs and other formal and informal civil society groupings.

In the chapter ‘Media decadence’, Keane starts to examine the dark side of this abundance of communication. For example, he recognises how some modern communications can become echo chambers of the ‘narcissistic narrow-minded’ and that while millions of people are communicating with each other, few communicate thoughtfully (122-123). Keane argues that communicative abundance can encourage concentrations of power without limit and can ‘weaken the spirit and substance of public scrutiny and control of arbitrary power that is so vital for democracy’ (112).

Further to this point, the extent to which public is duped by those in power, depends on where they live and the context in which the communication takes place. To this end, he names some of the concerns which arise from this communicative abundance, such as the Google’s PageRank system which promotes a ‘democratic feel’ to its organisation of the internet and yet contradicts this with corporate secrecy (159). Similarly Keane discusses the so-called ‘Minot principle’, which drew its name from a town in the United States where a major train accident failed to be mentioned on the local news. This was the result of a number of powerful, monopolistic corporations which dominate ‘the telling and diffusion of public stories, creating public silences and distorting citizens imaginations of who they are and who they could become’ (160-161).

Keane also joins the ranks of those concerned about media tycoons, denouncing the oligopoly that ‘breeds political arrogance, a brazen and insolent sense of being ‘naturally at the cutting edge of all things publicly important’ (163). He does recognise that media firms are generally not interested in governmental power for mischievous personal ends but rather for winning better business deals. (167). Of corporate media he states:

“ Not to be underestimated is their role as fairy godmothers blessed with the power of sprinkling incumbent governments with the fairy dust of positive media coverage (or to hand out its opposite, crusades and bullying, shit lists, character assassinations and other types of rough media treatment) (168). ”

Keane then moves to a discussion of ‘mediacracy’ – the hidden power zones – that result from associations of journalists, politicians, public relations practitioners, consultants and lobbyists. He acknowledges that the problem is particularly serious in the US, Britain, central-eastern Europe, India and Japan where hidden media management skills have become routine.

“ The age of organised political fabrication is upon us, and that all popularly elected governments are today engaged in clever, cunning struggles to kidnap voters mentally through the manipulation of appearances, with the help of accredited journalists and other public relations curators (171-172). ”

Governments, he argues, are participants in the ‘game of disinformation and deception, protagonists of the dark arts of colonising influential media, active contributors to the “age of contrivance”’ (175). He draws on the work of Nick Davies’ (2008) *Flat Earth News* to discuss the media-politics triangle where journalists and politicians work in a symbiotic relationship. He urges media scholars to resist the temptation to use the simple arguments of a ‘feral beast media’ and ‘government spin’.

“ They are equally misleading; neither captures the habitual docility of journalists, its ‘bottom-up’ connivance and entrapment within the trend towards government media management (178). ”

Keane acknowledges that the 'churnalism' described by Davies, has lead to a situation where many complicated stories are not reported because they need professional patience and well resourced and in-depth research (180). Instead of 'flat earth news', there is in reality 'no earth' news as reportage about some stories is not in the interests of the media-politics triangle. He uses the example of the phone hacking scandal in the UK to discuss how media and politicians hang on to power at the expense of personal integrity and other standards of high quality journalism (182-183).

Public relations consultants and lobbyists are also criticised by Keane for their role in media decadence. He notes that the inside players swap roles repeatedly.

“ Journalists become lobbyists. Lobbyists are sometimes fresh from the fields of journalism; lobbyists morph into government officials, or occasionally go into politics, or into think tanks, which (contrary to the name) are not sites of cerebration, but temporary resting places for former or wannabe politicians, journalists and consultants. Politicians, meanwhile, move in all directions (189). ”

Having raised all of these issues in the chapter on media decadence, it seems a little strange that Keane follows with a chapter called 'Democracy's opponents'. This fourth and shortest chapter focuses mostly on China and what it means when citizens do not have freedom of communication. He uses the case study from the emerging superpower to discuss how authorities reject independent public monitoring of power and free and fair elections, but yet still seek the support of citizens (197). He calls China a form of phantom democracy where:

“ Journalists are left to second-guess and third-guess what is officially required of them, and to make their own mistakes. The forces of self-censorship are naturally powerfully, for every journalist knows that putting a foot wrong can prove to be costly (201). ”

In his final chapter, 'Why freedom of public communication?', Keane asks why anyone should care about media decadence and he discusses his concern about those who exercise arbitrary power. These are the people who 'resort to eliminating their opponents, through torture, imprisonment, disappearance or death' (220). When people have freedom of communication he argues, democratic politics can flourish. He also makes the point that freedom of communication is freedom from media decadence because: 'It enables these citizens to live their lives democratically in freedom and dignity, as equals, without fear eating into their souls' (223). Keane's argument is that catastrophes are symptoms of the failure of democracy.

In support of his argument, he cites a number of megaprojects such as Hong Kong's airport, the Channel Tunnel project, and Australia's Conoco Phillips liquid natural gas project to discuss how many parts of the planet are at risk from power experiments (221). He talks about megaprojects going wrong, and how there is often silence instead of stories about such projects. An important case study of the Fukushima catastrophe is included and he notes that: 'Silent exercises of arbitrary power by manipulative human beings – the absence of monitory democracy – have harmful effects on citizens' (239).

Keane urges citizens to be on the lookout for all forms of unchecked arbitrary power because of the dangers it poses to democracy and warns that an absence of freedom of communication and monitory democracy invites catastrophic missteps (243). He ends his book with a call to arms, of sorts, to wise citizens – although he doesn't actually nominate *who* is wise in this age of communicative abundance. Nonetheless, he trumpets: 'get involved in public affairs, initially by making public noise, smart public noise, well-targeted din and disquiet loud enough to shatter the eerie silences that can so easily cause things to go so terribly wrong for so many people' (245).

About the reviewer

Alexandra Wake is a journalist and lecturer at RMIT University. Alex has worked in Australia, Ireland, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates, and has worked in print, radio, television and online. She is completing a Ph.D examining journalism education as conducted by Australians and New Zealanders. Her last review for GMJ-AU was of Jonathan Green's (2013) book *The Year My Politics Broke*.