

Theme article

Democracy and information: transmitters and receivers

Maurice B. Line

The author

Maurice B. Line is a former University Librarian and Director-General at the British Library.

Keywords

Democracy, Information, Media, Mass media, Newspapers

Abstract

Democracy, recognised as a flawed but desirable system of government, relies ultimately on trusting the people, whose views are therefore of prime importance. Their views therefore need to be well informed if democracy is to work successfully. The main formers of opinion, television and the press, commonly distort or over-simplify issues such as crime and asylum. There is plenty of reliable information available; the problem is that most people are not equipped intellectually or psychologically to desire information, to access it, to challenge it and to discriminate between good and bad. Development of such characteristics is a task for the education system; narrow "information literacy" programmes are not enough. Libraries, as resources and channels of information, are essential elements in the provision of a wide range of knowledge and opinion.

Electronic access

The Emerald Research Register for this journal is available at

<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/researchregister>

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at

<http://www.emeraldinsight.com/0143-5124.htm>

This article is based largely on the situation in the UK at the present time. There are parallels in many if not most other developed countries, but the situation in the UK is obviously the best known to me. The paper also reflects some of my personal interests and concerns. It approaches the subject from the angle of democracy, and considers the need in an effective democracy for the wide dissemination of reliable information to a population that can use it.

Characteristics and problems of democracy

Democracy is widely recognised as a desirable but highly flawed system of government. As E.M. Forster said: "Two cheers for democracy"[1]; and according to Churchill: "It has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time". In its pure sense, "government for the people by the people", it is impossible; this would require the opinion of everyone over a certain age to be sought on every significant policy and action, and the views of the majority to be accepted and applied. In practice, national polls are taken every few years on packages of policies, and where (as in Switzerland) plebiscites are used more frequently on more issues, they are still selective. Also, the timing of both elections and plebiscites is open to manipulation in many countries. Between elections, voting is almost everywhere delegated to elected representatives, who constitute parliaments or senates, and while the representatives may listen to what their constituents say, most of the time they vote with their party. Elections themselves can be manipulated – not only in less developed countries in Africa and elsewhere but, as was shown three years ago in the USA, a country that prides itself on its democratic tradition.

Democracy also carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction: once elected, a government can choose to turn itself into a dictatorship – or a country may knowingly elect a government that proposes to behave in a dictatorial manner. Something like this nearly occurred in Algeria in 1991, when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first



round of voting and the probable election of an Islamic government was stalled by the creation of a State Security Panel and the subsequent abolition of the FIS (and also years of terrorism by both government and anti-government forces). In Iraq as I write, the prospect of a similar result is likely to lead to the postponement of any election for many months. There are also many pseudo-democracies: one-party states (often so because only one party is permitted by law), where the only possible choice is between Yes and No, and where the result always seems to be Yes. In “developed” democracies like the UK, prime ministers, nominally subject to all kinds of restraints, are nevertheless accused of acting “presidentially” or even as dictators: this accusation has been levelled both at Thatcher and at Blair.

These problems are not due merely to the wish of leaders to dominate. They exist because democracy may work very slowly even when it needs to work quickly, and to be cautious where boldness is needed. The continuing indecision over whether the UK should join the euro is one example of this: the balance between the forces ranged for and against fluctuates wildly, and views on both sides are strongly felt and expressed. The resulting delays are arguably more harmful to the country than the “wrong” decision would be: prolonged sitting on the fence is not only painful for the sitter but ultimately damaging to the fence.

Democracy relies on trusting the people. But who is to say they are right? The question can be put the other way round: who is to say they are wrong? “Pure” democracy demands that the people should have what they want, even if it is not good for them. After all, if it does not work out as hoped, the people can vote the government out next time – so long as it has not chosen to make itself into a dictatorship or banned other parties in the interval. It is arguable that in Algeria the party the people thought they wanted should have been allowed their chance: failure of an FIS government followed by a new election would have reinforced democracy – assuming, that is, that elections had not been abolished. Representative democracy, however forceful the country’s leader is, cannot ignore public opinion, in whatever way it is expressed: strikes, demonstrations, newspapers, broadcasting. Democracy implies the right to free speech, however much it disagrees with

government policy or even majority public opinion.

Democracy does not, however, mean unbridled speech, let alone action, that can damage society: democracy has the ability and right to suppress behaviour that can harm it, although this right has to be exercised with great care. It is absolute nonsense to say, as Donald Rumsfeld did in May this year when dismissing the damage to people and property after the Iraq war, that “free people have the right to do bad things and commit crimes” (a doctrine it would be interesting to see applied in the USA).

The supply of information by the media

The big question here is, how competent are the public to express an opinion? Shaw said: “Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few”. But gut feeling should not be ignored, and it can be argued that it is as valid as the considered opinions of a highly educated and informed elite: for one thing, it is most unlikely that a well informed élite would ever reach a consensus on anything (if it did, there would be many fewer serious journals, and meetings of university senates would be far shorter). The current debate among economists as to whether the UK should join the euro is ample demonstration of this. Also, if popular opinion were regularly overridden by the views of an élite, massive resentment would be created. Just as every individual has ultimately to take responsibility for his/her own actions, so should the body corporate.

However, most individuals try to find out at least a few basic facts before taking a decision such as, for example, buying a house, a car or a washing machine – or even taking a marital partner. They almost certainly seek fewer facts before making up their minds about national matters. Among the reasons for this are that national matters have (or appear to have) less direct relevance to them – one exception being tax, which therefore assumes greater importance than most other issues. Another reason, with which this article is more concerned, is that the necessary information is often more complex and difficult to obtain; and when it is found it is often cloaked in deceptive wrappings, harder to disentangle than the advertisements that

purport to show the virtues of houses, cars and washing machines.

The wrappings are designed by the media – chiefly newspapers and television – and political parties. Most of them contain no information whatever, but they are less damaging than those that claim to do so. To say that the coverage by television of the recent war in Iraq was inadequate is to understate the case. While the performances of the BBC and CNN were far from exemplary, they were models of accuracy and impartiality compared with that of Fox News. Even the highest quality newspapers, while they may, and often do, present bare facts, interpret them in ways that reflect the editor's (and/or proprietor's) prejudices and confirm the reader's. Over-simplification is also an almost universal feature of reporting. Three-quarters of the British press is controlled by three right-wing media magnates. Examples of distorted representation of facts are easy to find; I will take a current UK issue that I have studied in some depth – crime and imprisonment.

Examples of distortion

It is a fact that the overall incidence of crime in England and Wales has decreased by 27 per cent over the last six years (though gun crime and drugs crime, which affect certain areas in certain cities disproportionately, have recently seen an increase). It is also a fact that the rate of imprisonment has increased enormously over the last decade or so; more people are sentenced to prison, and longer sentences are given: the current prison population is 72,000, compared with 42,000 in 1991. How to explain this extraordinary situation?

It is also known that people in general feel less secure, both with regard to their personal safety and to their property, than they used to. The great majority also think that crime is increasing. Why do they think this? Because the papers they read give a badly distorted picture. They stress areas where crime has gone up and describe in detail incidents of a horrific nature; a constant stream of such stories put before the public creates an impression of lawlessness and makes people feel vindictive and justified in demanding more and longer sentences. They rarely lie, in the sense of telling direct untruths; they do

not, for example, say that crime overall is rising, but they certainly do not mention that it is falling. Anyway, they argue, people like reading about crime, and find grim satisfaction in bad news. People seem to believe what they read, rather than what they experience.

The popular newspapers fail to mention other facts. They do not say that the UK now has the highest number of prisoners relative to population of any western European country (it is exceeded by Russia, and grossly exceeded by the USA, which has five times the UK incarceration rate). Nor do they mention that the cost of building one new prison is enough to pay for 60 new primary schools; nor that the cost of keeping a person in prison for one year is £25,000, which in aggregate amounts to nearly £2,000 million – enough to pay for some of the improvement in public services for which the public is constantly clamouring. Still less do they point out the money spent is at present largely wasted, since prison does more harm than good – “an expensive way of making bad men worse”, as a Conservative Home Secretary said over 20 years ago. Most prisoners who are released soon return. Short sentences (less than six months) are especially damaging, as there is not enough time to rehabilitate the prisoner, who on release often has little alternative to returning to his/her old life if he/she is to stay alive. The government has in fact an excellent prison education programme, which has been gradually eroded because of overcrowding. All the above facts are easily accessible, from publications and Web sites of the Home Office and bodies such as the Prison Reform Trust. It must be added, in case an impression is given that newspapers are all bad, that most of them have also been printed in such newspapers as *The Guardian*.

One seemingly obvious solution to this disastrous situation – uneconomic and at the same time damaging to society and individual human beings – is for the government to disseminate the facts. It is certainly a puzzle that they are not even trying to do so, when they must know that present policies incur a very high cost in money and in crime. But so indoctrinated is the public in quite different beliefs by now that the government would probably not be believed – any more than some of my audiences believe me when I quote official and undisputed figures. It is very hard to get

people to believe what they do not want to believe – as scientists find in the USA, where more than half the population evidently believes that the world was created less than 10,000 years ago.

I could equally have used asylum seekers as an example. The popular impression is of an uncontrollable flood of immigrants who enter the UK merely to improve their income, take jobs and housing that belong to “us”, and spend much of their time here committing crime. The truth is that numbers of asylum seekers are manageable; the figure was less than 100,000 a year at its peak, and is now down to 60,000, of whom only about 60 per cent are accepted. Even if this intake rate of about 35,000 were maintained over 20 years, it would amount to 700,000, to which figure children born to immigrants would have to be added. This would still represent only about 2 per cent of the population, and less than 3 per cent of the number of ordinary immigrants to the UK. They are obliged to live on tiny allowances, it appears that they contribute more to the economy than they consume, and they are responsible for very little crime. These facts too are easily obtained. The problem of criminals illegally entering the country is a separate though related one, which would exist whatever the government’s asylum policies. Again, the government yields to uninformed prejudices created by newspapers rather than acting coolly on the facts.

Both of these cases show up a major deficiency of democracy, and sometimes almost make me wish we had an enlightened autocracy which would impose sensible policies. The snag is of course that it might equally impose non-sensible policies; and anyway the likelihood, to judge from history, is that the rulers would not remain for ever enlightened and that their successors would be worse.

The need for an informed public

Ideally, the government of any developed democratic country should be able to assume an informed public, even though there will be occasions when it would prefer ignorance in order to carry out policies that suited itself; we must never forget that governments often like to – even when they do not have to – operate

in secrecy. Indeed, freedom of utterance and freedom of access to information are defining characteristics of democracy. Certainly the absence of both characteristics is notable in autocracies and totalitarian states; one of the first actions a new dictator takes is to establish control over the production, supply and use of information.

Freedom of access to information is however not enough: a good democracy needs widespread access to reliable and valid information. Two questions then arise:

- (1) How do you get reliable information to the public?
- (2) How do you ensure that the public is able to receive and recognise it?

It might be thought that the first question should include another: How do you stop unreliable information getting to the public? Unfortunately, the answer is that you cannot. Most countries have machinery for penalising the dissemination of deliberately wrong information, but as stated above newspapers find ways to distort information and create wrong impressions without actually lying. In fact, rather more countries, mainly totalitarian countries, penalise, often very severely, the publication of accurate information. It is impossible to have meaningful press freedom which does not carry with it the freedom to distort.

The emphasis must therefore be on positive dissemination. The government has a clear responsibility to provide the necessary information, and generally it does this in official publications, though there have been episodes where unpalatable statistics have ceased to be collected or have not been published; the handling by the Conservative government of the 1980s and 1990s of statistics on unemployment and poverty are examples. What governments do much less well is to promulgate the facts in a more accessible way, for example in more popular and readable or viewable forms.

The facts are also available in various books and journal articles. But almost all of these are “serious” or academic, and never reach a wider public. So we are back to television, radio and the press, which is as we have seen, with some admirable exceptions, seriously at fault. There is even less means of making the media tell the truth – the whole truth – than of stopping them from distorting the truth.

Towards an information-hungry and discriminating public

On then to the second question. There is a well known proverb: "You can take a horse to the water, but you can't make it drink". We need to make sure first that horses are able to tell whether the water is polluted, because the water suppliers will not say. If it is not polluted, horses then have to be made thirsty so that they want water. (The proverb breaks down here, since any real horse will eventually drink any water available rather than die of thirst.) In human terms, people have to want information, and have to be able to tell good from bad information.

With an ever-increasing proportion of the age group undergoing higher education, the idea that the public is not sufficiently educated to use information is becoming less tenable. It is however not clear that the educated public is much less gullible or more discriminating than the less educated (it would be interesting, and not very hard, to find out). Something is badly wrong with an education system that turns out people who seem to have little curiosity and who accept more or less without question what they read in newspapers whose main purposes are entertainment and profit rather than the dissemination of real news. The "received wisdom" (to use J.K. Galbraith's splendid coinage) often proves on examination not to be wisdom at all but a consensus based on lazy thinking. The main permanent thing of value derived from education, especially higher education, is not the subject matter of learning, which in many fields goes quickly out of date, but the capacity to access information and to discriminate between the valid and invalid and a realisation that while the answers to questions change all the time the questions themselves rarely change, and need to be repeatedly asked.

This means that everyone should be able to know where to find information, how to access it (in printed or electronic form), how to question and assess its value and accuracy, and how to absorb it. They should also retain and develop the curiosity with which every human being is born in order to seek information – to be fair, a few radio and television programmes do stimulate thought and discussion (in contrast to the rest, most of which are calculated to numb minds) – and in order to develop the habit of refusing to

accept any statement at face value, however eminent the person making it (especially if that person is eminent in a different field – it is amazing how much respect is paid to, for example, the Prince of Wales's views on architecture). I would like to add that they should also have the humility not to pontificate on subjects where they have little or no knowledge, but this is probably too much to ask – we have all done it.

There are numerous "information literacy" programmes around. However, most of these appear to be limited to the inculcation of skills in online information searching, and do not address the more fundamental and severe problem of information discrimination. Yet discrimination can be taught. I knew a biology professor who used to give his students an advertisement for a drug that claimed to have certain effects; they were required to research whether the claims were justified, and moreover whether there were any bad side-effects. The students enjoyed the hunt for evidence, and were even more pleased when their findings were submitted to the drug manufacturer and led to changes in the advertisement. I myself have given students a statement by a respected information guru – sometimes one that was widely accepted – and asked them to pick it to bits, which most of them did with relish. We need far more of such sorts of exercise, which should be regular ingredients of every higher education course. Why wait until then? Should not every school adopt such methods? After all, most of what young people learn by way of subject content is out of date in a few years, whereas critical learning skills never are. Learning how to learn is the most important thing we learn, and the necessary skills and mental habits should be an essential and integral part of all education from the earliest days.

In fact, efforts are being made to achieve just this. Following a US initiative, a few primary – yes, primary – schools in the UK have introduced classes in philosophy, with much success. The children like them, because they continue the question-asking pattern of their pre-school days and because there are no wrong or right answers. They carry the discussions into their homes and so influence their parents, thus, one hopes, starting a virtuous circle and helping to establish a lifelong habit.

Libraries as indispensable elements in an informed democracy

As to where to find information, while the Internet is open to all with the necessary equipment, training and guidance in its use are desirable if not essential for most people. There also need to be resources of printed knowledge where people can browse and search, again with help if necessary. Libraries, as resources of both information and expertise, offer both of these. Discrimination in information use is of course still needed, but at least the provision of a wide range of different collections of facts and interpretations makes it easier to escape bias. Attempts by library authorities in some countries and towns to exclude material they strongly disagree with are misguided; the wider the range of views available, and the more exposed the public are to variety, the less danger there is of reinforcement of unwarranted prejudices.

The importance of printed matter is coming to be seriously underestimated. Students in higher education are increasingly hooked on to (caught in?) the Web, and many seem to believe that if it is not on the Web it either is not there or if it is it does not matter. How students of, say, history or European literature can go through a degree course without exposure to the extended argument that only books can provide is beyond me – and it is still further beyond me that their teachers can allow this to happen. I myself use the Internet a great deal, and would now feel seriously deprived without the vast range of material (some of it knowledge) to which it offers access. But I should feel even more deprived without books, and I cannot imagine what it would have been like to grow up without them – or what I would be like if I had done so.

A great deal has been said in recent years, mostly by people who know more about technology than using information, about the coming demise of libraries. It is true that there is a substantial decline in the conventional use made of public libraries (consultation and borrowing of printed matter), in the UK at any rate, but this is partly balanced by the increasing use of IT services.

Death, whether sudden or prolonged, seems to me highly unlikely, but if it does happen it would mean the end of a unique organisation, and one uniquely able to serve as a source and channel of the information provision on which sound democracy must depend. The UK Government appears to recognise the importance of public libraries to some extent, since it has funded a huge – and successful – programme (The People's Network) to ensure that every public library is wired up; and it has also set standards for expenditure and service, though they have yet to be firmly enforced. Nevertheless, funding for ordinary acquisitions and services has declined in real terms, and in some libraries opening hours have had to be reduced and staff reduced (small wonder that conventional use is declining!). Yet good new libraries, designed around people and attractive to use, have shown that it is possible to buck the trend.

For all their essential contribution to an informed society and thus to democracy, there is not a great deal that libraries can do to contribute to the huge task of developing the critical and questioning public that is a *sine qua non* of an effective democratic society: transmitters and channels of information are of little use without effective receivers. As already noted, that task must fall mainly on the education system. Libraries are not however completely helpless. They could, for example, set up critical reading groups, as some already do, under a skilled facilitator, to encourage discrimination in the use of reading material; and they both could and should keep in close contact with educators at all levels, from primary to higher and adult education, and beyond to third age groups, ensuring that they (the libraries) are able to provide any necessary literature and information support. If necessary, they should take the initiative in co-operative activities. I believe that libraries in general have seen their role in too limited terms, and that their vision should be broader. A more informed and discriminating public should after all mean greater demand on the public library, which would counteract the diminishing use most of them are experiencing.

Conclusion

Democracy depends both on freedom and accessibility of information and on an informed public. Information – good and bad – is there in almost excessive abundance, but far more needs to be done if we are to have a public with minds that are receptive, open, questioning and discriminating. Education must play the primary part in developing such

minds, and libraries must contribute and participate.

Note

- 1 The full quotation is: "So two cheers for democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give it three".