Media, politics and affects: the United Kingdom after Brexit

Interview with Stephen Coleman

Alessandra Aldé
Universidade Estadual do Rio de Janeiro
[Rio de Janeiro State University]

Media, politics and affects: the United Kingdom after Brexit

Alessandra ALDÉ

Stephen Coleman is Professor of Political Communication at the School of Media and Communication of the University of Leeds, one of the most important in the United Kingdom. He is the author of *How Voters Feel* (2013), the *Handbook of Digital Poltics* (2015, organized with Deen Freelon) and, more recently, *Can The Internet Strengthen Democracy?* (2017), and his work has been very influential in the internet & politics field, especially focusing on the uses of political communication and the internet by citizens and popular culture. Professor Coleman received Alessandra Aldé in his office a few days after the referendum about the permanence of the UK in the European Union, in 2016, for this exclusive interview. He broached some of his favorite topics, especially the meaning of the referendum dynamics and result for British politics, as well as a symptom of more global trends. Still under the commotion caused by a result unforeseen by many, Coleman himself seemed not to be surprised, and his analysis feels dramatically pertinent to more recent developments in international and domestic politics.

Professor Coleman, I would like to ask you about the Referendum. How do you see not only the outcome, but also the process of public opinion dynamics from the point of view of voters, of their feelings of animosity towards one another, and also regarding the feelings towards democracy. It appears that there's a representation crisis that includes these democratic feelings, this basic political awareness.

Democracy as it has developed in this country has always been based on a compromise around constitutional democracy, but nobody ever accepted cultural democracy. We had a democracy in which there was an essentially pre-democratic notion of the masses, that people cannot have major cognitive challenges (They do have cognitive challenges, but that is in relation to everything we do. We all have them, which does not mean that we

cannot achieve political consciousness.). It includes the assumption that the media has therefore to be built around this cultural deficit, and that you have to speak to people on the assumption that they cannot understand rational messages. And this has gone on for a long time, and there has also been a certain amount of luck in this process. The balance sort of worked over quite a long time. Constitutional democracy has been used as a way of getting the kind of cultural outcomes that we want. You put questions to people, they come back and give you the kind of answers that you want them to give, as part of the process of pluralism between political parties, pluralism in the media, but with a rather narrow agenda.

What has happened in this Referendum is that the cultural contempt has now come back to bite the political elite (forcing it) to realise that you cannot have a democracy on the assumption that you operate a propaganda model. And the Leave Campaign was built around the propaganda model in two respects. First of all, it was driven by a tabloid press ideology. I had many people from the Remain Campaign writing to me over the last week saying: "Why did this happen?", "It's happened?", "How could it have happened?" and so on. And I say to them "Look! You all voted Remain, you do not do what I do every day, which is to read the tabloid newspapers". I am paid to read them. If you read the tabloids newspapers, this does not come as a surprise. These are a sustained racist, xenophobic, populist media. Not unlike most of the rest of the world actually, but in some respects one of the worst tabloids media in the world. The second reason why I see this as a comeback is that we have a system of impartiality in our public service media, particularly in our broadcasting, which says that you have to give lies equal weight as to the truth. Impartiality is a great characteristic of public service media. The assumption is that if somebody represents a minority party but they are standing for election, they can have an equal share of the time. That is perfectly reasonable. However, when you take that impartiality, as the public service broadcasters did in this country, to the extent of saying that you are at liberty, you are given a license to disseminate to a mass population sample, provable untruths, and you will get the consequences.

Those two factors: tabloid newspapers who dominated politics in this country, and we even had the Leveson Inquiry[1] and a government that ignored its proposals. Public service media: impartiality without any kind of concern about epistemological control. In addition, you a have a group of politicians who grew up mainly within the Conservative Party, on the occasion, through the tabloid press. Boris Johnson, only job he's ever had, as a journalist. Michael Gove, only job he has ever had, as a journalist. The [former] leading Conservative in the European Parliament, Daniel Hannah, only job he has ever had was as a journalist. These are people whose only skill is being a propagandist. Now, if you have a society where one of the basics to get into the political elite is that you are a skilful propagandist, so that is a country that is taking big risks with democracy. The consequence of this is very simple.

The Leave Vote won because it appealed to a simplistic notion of control. They had a toxic brew of, on the one hand, appealing to a simplistic notion of democracy (People really love democracy). And, on the other hand, a hatred of experts. (The conservative Minister) Michael Gove during the Referendum campaign said that scientific experts are like the people who served the Nazi Party in the 1930's. This is a man who has been a Minister, he has been running the entire justice system in this country under the present government[2]. When you have that kind of discourse, the consequence in terms of public opinion is not a surprise to me actually.

The way you describe it sounds like right wing populism. We always thought of Europe in general, and the UK in particular, as a more educated and more informed public opinion than we do, for example, in Brazil.

We are the post-industrial working class. I grew up in London, I am a Londoner, a cosmopolitan, and my family came from European countries. My mother's family is Russian, my father's family is Dutch. I love being a European. I love European literature

---

[1] Judicial Inquiry on the abuses of news media. It aimed to investigate the role of the press and police in a phone-hacking scandal, on 13 July 2011. Lord Justice Leveson was appointed as Chairman of the Inquiry.
[2] Minister of Justice during the Conservative Governments of David Cameron and Theresa May.

and love European music, I see myself as a European. I then went to live in Oxford, which in a way is more parochial than London, but it is still an intellectual city. And then I came to Leeds. What I was amazed at, when I came up to live in the north of England. It was my exposure to the white post-industrial working class. On the whole you do not meet a lot of them in Oxford or in London, although you can find them as they are the majority in this country. Leeds is the first industrial city in the world. The Industrial Revolution started here. And these are people who have been very often out of work for generations. It is not just them, it is their parents, their grandparents… There are housing estates outside of Leeds, which would shock you - who have seen the slums of Rio. I am not saying that people are living in great poverty, but it would surprise you, they are like deserts. There's nothing there except for the Pound Shops and Cash converters, where you take in stolen goods and you get a bit of money. We are talking of millions of people in this position. And then you have the political communication system concentrated in London, within a bubble of middle class people who came out of Oxford or Cambridge and, very often, went to Public Schools. You have a disconnection. And so, you are right, traditionally we had a sophisticated and a liberal population, but this country is very ripe for populism, because we've been going in this direction, which is essentially an American direction.

Do you think it is a global trend?

It is a global trend. One may call it neoliberalism, but I prefer to call it capitalism. Whatever you call it, it is a global trend but it happens differently in different places. The reason why it is so peculiar in Britain is because we had this background of Oxford and Cambridge and the Public School system and the Stock Exchange and the City of London. So the rest of the world sees *that* and they don't see - it is almost like an apartheid, you do not see the mass of the working class of this country. And so, periodically, you have an international football match and the mass of the working class go out and you suddenly go "Hang on! What's going on? They are psychotic!" And the reason is they have been forgotten for a long time. The traditional political parties… The Labour Party had forgotten them, the Conservative Party never liked them. Europe seemed to them distant. They do not see themselves getting money from it, they do not understand the regulations, they have had

this incessant tabloid narrative that Europe is damaging their lives. And one of the problems of the Remain Campaign was that it operated (going back to my notion about cultural compromise) on a basis that the mass of people would not be able to understand anything but frightening them. So there was this "Operation Fear", and actually it did not work. Because what a lot of them said was that there is nothing to be afraid of, since nothing could be worse than the way things are. When people feel that they have lost everything, they will go for all sort of populist alternatives.

(…)

You have to look at the people who have nothing. That is why turnout was a key to this Referendum, incidentally. Everybody said that a low turnout would be good for Leave because it would mean that many young people had not gone out to vote, and a higher turnout would be good for Remain. But we had a very high turnout because people that went out to vote were people who never vote. From what I've seen so far a significant number of people who voted in the referendum had not voted in any election for 30 years! It motivated them. They went out and said "Wow! This is it! We are taking our country back, we are going to get rid of the immigrants, we are going to do all this". Actually one of the factors was purely contingent and random, (the fact) that we had very bad weather in London on the day of the referendum. And so, in London, which was for Remain, people stayed home. London had a slightly lower turnout than the rest of the country, which shot up (the vote) and people who normally do not vote, voted, and it just tipped it over.

Here is what I think about the leave campaign: Boris Johnson did not want to win (and I think what happened today with him [withdrawing his name as leader for the Conservatives] is proof that I am right). Most of this has to do with internal battles in the Conservative Party. Johnson led the Leave Campaign, but after all he could easily have supported the Remain, because he is not a man of deep principles. The reason he supported and led the Leave Campaign was that he wanted to embarrass Cameron. He wanted the Leave Campaign to just lose, and he would have then come along and said 'Well look, I can lead us remaining in Europe, but I can help to keep some of these Leavers on our side'. And he got more than he bargained for. He won. Somebody in the Guardian wrote about Michael Gove, the other Conservative who equally did not plan to win. He used a beautiful

phrase, he said that the day after the Referendum Michael Gove looked like a student who had just come down from a trip on drugs and realised that he had killed his best friend. These guys suddenly looked around and thought 'Hang on, we wanted to win a battle on the Conservative Party, but we did not want to bust the British economy!" But they had done it. That is why I think Boris Johnson has decided today that he is dropping out.

Nobody believed that this could happen...

No. I think that there was an assumption that, if turnout was as it normally is, it would be a Remain (result).

Your thesis is about how people engage. How did you see citizen participation during the process?

This is where it really comes down. Well, it seems to me that there are three things from my kind of research and your kind of research that are relevant. Firstly, affect is not something separate from rationality. It has never been and was certainly not in this referendum. And neither should it be looked down on as something less important, it is just an element of our approach to the world. It is not a reason to condemn people. But affect on its own cannot determine political outcomes. Secondly, the continuing inadequacy of the public media, particularly in this country, as my friend Jay Blumler has been saying for forty years longer than I have. We are now suffering from the consequences of this. And thirdly, we have a failure of the political parties to engage with people, to talk to people. There's no national conversation, there's a national shouting match. You can see the same thing, worse, in America, with and around Trump. I wrote something called "The conversation about Trump", an analysis about him that really applies to the Referendum. The key to being a politician now is to appear not to be a politician. And the problem of trust now is not the old problem of trust, which is about politicians not being trusted. The problem with trust now is the opposite: it is politicians being trusted too much. Many years ago a writer called G. K. Chesterton said: "When people stop believing in something, they

do not believe in nothing, they believe in anything". And that is what has happened. We have a crisis of belief where people have stopped believing in whatever they believed in, but it does not mean that they have just stopped believing. It means that they are now gullible, they are open, and this is a big problem for us. Not just in this country - it is a global trend.

It is true there has been loss of confidence and mistrust, towards politicians, parties and even news media. What you are saying is that the public is looking for references that are outside these establishments...

That is very well put, yes, I agree. I think also about "trust"... So many words were used in political communication studies. We stretch them too far. Like "Public Opinion". What is public opinion? And so on. I think "trust" is another one of these words. First, we say: 'Why, there is not enough trust', then we say 'Yeah, but maybe there should not be too much trust'. I think the issue of trust has to do with two psychological dimensions that we can broadly call 'representation', which is also a political one, and 'projection'. What we are looking at with Trump and in the Referendum here is the same thing you have looked at in populist politicians across the world. It is projection, it is about people in a condition of cognitive dissonance where they are looking at leaders and saying: "I know that these leaders believe what I believe". Once they have made that association, then even if the leader says something else, it does not matter. When Trump says: "I can go out and shoot people in the middle of New York" and that people would still vote for him, it is because he has understood that. The projection is so great that they will forgive him and it is a problem. I remember when Tony Blair was elected, in 1997, this was a very positive thing for the Labour Government. We had had a long period, 18 years, of the Thatcher Government, then John Major. It was a very bad period, in my view, for Britain. Then you had a moment, between 1997 and 2000, of wonderful projection in this country, where people looked at this New Labour and at this young, photogenic, telegenic Prime Minister, and they said: "He is us, this is how we want to be. Cool Britannia. We want to shake off our Victorian past". It was not actually about trust, or mistrust, it was about projection.

I would like to bring into this equation the internet element. There seems to be some juxtaposition, a coincidence between internet access and the vote for Remain. The people who voted for Leave in general were older, poorer, less educated and less urban. Does that reflect in some way also the access and interaction with the respective campaigns? Do you think that it could be part of the explanation?

Yes, I do, very much so. I think in our studies of the internet, we – I mean all of us, this is a criticism of my work as much as any work – we have concentrated on that sort of socio-demographic cleavages, but recently we have had to come to terms with the fact that these do not explain everything. It is also about what people do with the internet, and what they do politically. Even taking all of the other things that people are doing online aside, speaking of those who use the internet politically, they are using it for very different uses and gratifications. We have focused so much on the creative dimension of the political internet that we had failed to pay enough attention to the internet doing something quite counter-intuitive that is slowing down politics. For the 'creatives', the internet speeds up politics. You are watching a debate, you are tweeting at the same time, and this is reinforcing a group of people who are already doing that. It is making them better being politically engaged. And we have good evidence now to show that (a) they have engaged and (b) some people who are not doing that offline are now doing it online, particularly younger people. This is good evidence and interesting empirical research. What we neglected are all of the other people around who are not using the internet or only using it for kind of traditional surveillance, gratifications. And it seems to me that in relation to the political internet, it's been really unsuccessful, really inadequate.

This is the basis of a recent research project, one of my biggest research projects at the moment, an attempt to create what we are calling 'slow politics'. We started with televised debates during the elections. We now want to create a platform for the next elections where watching the debate on the television, or tweeting on real time is not the only moment when decisions are made. Because very few of us do make decisions in real time, so (we are thinking) how can we slow down some of this and check the facts? See where the

arguments connect with each other, do rhetorical analysis of the performance of the politician, so that when they are using tricks... I think it is a really good platform, a really exciting project and we were lucky. We were given about a half million pounds from one of the research councils to work on it, a technology project as well as a social sciences project. What informed that project at a theoretical level was the capabilities theory from Amartya Sen, a work that is traditionally done around welfare. The question that is asked by Sen, the economist, is: "What do people need in order to function as the kind of human being that they want to be?" We translated that question as: "What do citizens need to act as a kind of democratic people that they want to be?" We then did a large amount of qualitative research where we tried to produce a list of capabilities that people wanted, and then we tried to build this platform around these capabilities. It has been really interesting. What is interesting to me about it is that it moves away from this idea that the internet should be a reinforcement technology for the politically engaged and it starts to address the question of what could the internet do in creative and imaginative ways for people that who've got access to the internet but are actually outside the political sphere. That is the question.

When you look at current democracies, most people are not politically interested, at least not to the level of the expectations of democratic theories. So, when we talk of capabilities, does this address the needs that real people express, or are we being idealistic?

It is a great question because one has to be careful about the notion of what philosopher Martha Nussbaum calls adaptive preferences. It says that if you ask a person who lacks education whether they need more education they might say no. People adapt to what they do not have. So, this is when deliberation comes in, because part of the capabilities theory still is about trying to stimulate people to understand, to translate their needs into what it is that they need - not just as needs and wants, because you might want something at an adaptive level, but what do you really need? In terms of democracy that is crucial. We have tried to work mostly with people who are not politically engaged and ask them: "What would make you politically engaged?", "What do you lack?" and so on. This has involved

a qualitative process that has had to confront things, like psychological dimensions, that Political Scientists are normally a little bit hesitant to touch. Such as embarrassment, shame… So, a lot of people in our groups told us: "I have views, but I am scared that if I say something, somebody is going then to ask. Like talking in French when you are in Paris: I have to say something, but what happens if somebody speaks back to me and I cannot understand what they are saying? Thus, I do not say anything. Or others who said: "I once said something and someone made a fool of me". And another one who says: "Why can't I talk to other people, when I want this to be a social process?" and another one who says "I want to feel recognised by people". Part of what I want a politician to do is not just tell me how they can help me or tell me the truth, I want them to have a sense that they know me, or know people like me, that they have a feeling for me. Now, that is a capability beyond the need in the sense that it is very hard to express that in terms of a demand. You cannot say to politicians that they have to recognise people. But if they do not, and if we do not have the means of enabling people to get those things, I suspect we will be soon dealing with greater levels of disengagement. So, it is about tackling disengagement from quite different angles and trying to understand what could create an engaged citizen. I think the internet is really important in that. I have colleagues like Todd Graham that have been doing a lot of work on how political conversation emerges in non-political settings. I find this quite interesting. Todd Graham's PhD, which I examined some years ago, was a study of a TV show "Wife Swap", where you take someone from one kind of family and put them in another kind of family. It is reality TV, a very popular television show. And they had an online forum where they discussed the issues, and they would say things like: "Why does this middle class family does things like that?" or: "How do they treat their children", "What are their attitudes towards work" and so on and so forth. He took the Wife Swap forum and the Guardian newspaper forum, probably the most sophisticated political discussion forum in the UK, applied a deliberative norm to each and found out that there was more normative deliberation on 'Wife Swap' than there was on The Guardian. Because when people talk politics, they come with a kind of frame in mind, a sort of pre-framing of what it means to talk politics, which is very often adversarial. Or face saving. It is blasting people with facts and claims, whereas what you find when there is a non-political political

discussion is that people are talking about social power on their own terms. That is moving politics onto those terms. It is a very, very important normative option.

It seems that the internet makes people bolder to talk about politics, to open their minds. Also the kind of contents that are not necessarily political, like memes and humour and even television shows. People said to me: "Oh, I don't read the news" or "I follow the referendum only on Facebook and on comedy shows". I understand that is not exactly what you are talking about…

No, but it is highly relevant. I think it is a logical conclusion, that the more symbolic political communication becomes, then eventually it becomes purely symbolic. In our study, we found that people who are watching Jon Stewart[3] on his show knew more about what was on the political agenda than a lot of people who watch the news on something like Fox News. This is a very interesting finding and [corroborates] what we know from work with inadvertent exposure to news. If the first question you ask to someone is: "Do you talk about politics on Facebook?" they will say no, but this is not because they do not talk about politics, it is because they cannot understand the question. We have to reframe that question. What we know is that, inadvertently, they may come up against values that they had no idea existed. They may find that they have to re-think the ways that they say certain things.

In terms of the boldness and the stridency of online politics, which is undoubtedly there, this is a design factor. It is not a determining consequence of the technology, clearly. We had the same debate about television in the 1960s – that television was going to infantilize people. It has infantilized some people, it has educated others. I am on public record for saying "I've probably got as much education from watching television as I've got from going to school". I love watching television. I chose wisely (I think) what I have watched, and I have found it a wonderful medium for understanding the world and thinking about people. And I do not just mean documentaries, I mean soap operas. I watched all sorts of things. So, again, there is very important research work to be done there. I had a student

---

[3] The host of *The Daily Show* from 1992 to 2015, in the US.

that was just awarded his PhD looking very carefully at a big amount of data, tens of thousands of messages comparing different design approaches and showing very clearly that one design against another one will determine the kind of conversation you will have. So, when I ran the first ever online consultations for a British Parliament back in the early 1990s, everybody said to me: "People online can't be trusted, they are going to shout, they are going to scream…" What actually happened was that while I was running them we had eight consultations and we did not take down one single message. Why? Because I think people felt, in a way, that they were going into Parliament, even though it was only virtual. They knew that the MPs would be looking at this, they felt that this was their opportunity to say something. So people are, in this sense, rational actors. If you put them in a space where they know that the only possibility of making their mark is going to be by shouting at other people and saying the most offensive thing, then that is what they will do. That is what we do offline. If you go to a pub in Leeds at half past ten on Friday night, you will see that's how people argue about politics. That is not to say that offline politics is like that, it is just to say that's what drunken people in pubs are like. Given the right design… This is about infrastructure. I am a great believer. It goes back to the point about slow politics. We have to decide. We have to build a normative design to internet infrastructures and we have to ask ourselves: "What do we want? What does society want?" Which is why Jay Blumler and I have been arguing, for over ten years now, for a public service space online. You have to be able to control [this platform]. We are not saying that we want the internet to be all like that, but that we want areas online where people know that they can go where there are rules, democratic protocols, and that is governed entirely by democratic norms. I think people would respond incredibly well to that.

What about the tools of e-petitioning that have been incorporated by the British Parliament? People do effectively participate. On my survey that was something everybody had done. Do you think it is an answer?

No, it does not provide the answer. The tool is not in itself necessarily bad, but I think it is an agenda setting tool. It is probably cool, although we have to be careful. Until the recent e-petition about wanting a second referendum, I think the biggest e-petition was against

the building of a mosque in an area of East London called Newham, for which there had been absolutely no plans to build a mosque. Therefore, not only it was a rather offensive petition against something, it was against something that was not even happening. Quite clearly, the problem with the petition system is that it is non deliberative. It could have been deliberative. In the Scottish Parliament, where they started this, they had both the petition and the forum. You stated your case, you argued. This comes to the crux of the problem: that we have half a democracy. We have a democracy where we are very good at counting votes. I think we have a reasonably honest voting system in this country. Some people say we should have proportional representation but, as far as it works, it works, and there is not an enormous amount of fraud. We have petition systems where you can help to set the agenda – all good. But without deliberation, it is like walking on one leg. We have an absence. That is what is needed for the petitions system. And that was a choice. I am not sure I've ever said this, but I was involved in the very beginning, when the government were designing their website. I was part of the team who were looking at it [the petitions platform], with British Telecom and various people from government departments. At every meeting I said that I would rather have fewer people participating – but discussion. Better than millions of people participating and not knowing what they're doing, not knowing what happens. And there was a conscious choice to go for one thing instead of the other. These things don't happen by accident. This goes back to the democratic compromise I begun by speaking about - "we do not want these people to talk (laughs) because if they talk they are going to talk rubbish! What we want is for them to have an access and help to set the agenda". I disagree with that. I think if you have a non deliberative plebiscitary system, it leans towards populism. And even if it does not, it does not enable people to get the kind of practice of democracy that they really need.

You do not seem very optimistic about the democratic potential of communication technologies. What is there to do in the direction of democracy and deliberation? What steps should we take? How could we prepare these democratic inputs?

Well, I am normally criticized for being too much of an optimist! I am an optimist, and in a way that it does not matter whether we are, you know... As Gramsci said: "Pessimism of

the intellect and optimism of the will." So I do not know whether I am an optimist becoming pessimistic or a pessimist becoming optimistic. I actually think things can change very quickly and I think there are some very interesting developments. I actually see the referendum as having some good outcomes. One of those outcomes is that the old dinosaur party system that we have in this country is going to collapse. I do not think it will survive this. I have been arguing this for years – generally, people take what I say seriously, but no one has ever taken *this* seriously. I say: nor the Labour Party nor the Conservative Party will last. They are both shells. Their memberships are absolutely unrepresentative. They are extremely small and they don't represent anything particularly. So, I think that we are seeing a change there. And I think we will see reforms. There is a tremendous amount of democratic imagination around. I think we need to be explicit about this democratic imagination. I just finished writing a book (two months ago) called "Can the internet strengthen democracy?" And my answer is: Yes. The reason why I think it can – despite of all the problems with the way that question was formulated, it lends itself to a deterministic answer – is because humans are "talking animals", We like to talk and we are talking more than ever. And the circulation of experience is remarkable. What the internet has done is it has broken down the old assumption that only certain experiences can get through the gatekeepers. That is where the memes, the humour, the growth of the protest movements, are important. The problem is in the institutions, and something has to give. Either the public will give up on the institutions or the institutions have to change. I think the institutions can change. I was working with the Labour Government in the early 2000s and I thought that we could really make a change. And we nearly did, but they became timid and did not pursue some of the policies ideas as far as they could have. When Obama was elected in America again he was advised by people who were pushing the agenda for various reasons. The old institutionalists have remained resilient in some respects. I know Manuel Castells has said: "You maybe need a kind of Icelandic situation". You need a situation where things are, if I may say, a Brazilian situation and now a British situation. We need a situation where things are so visibly falling to pieces and where there is such a sense that either people go towards the most desperate populism or they go towards the institutional rebuilding.

And that is where we as academics are playing an important part, in terms of our public role of putting out ideas that are on the public agenda. One of the things I have always done through my career is I have balanced writing scholarly material and going out and talking about policy and what could be done. I am doing such a bit of media interviews right now, after the referendum, and I am not being pessimistic. I am very optimistic, and I am saying I think now we have to sit back and ask ourselves these questions about how we deal with political affects and how we respect them, how we deal with the internet and how we use it in relation to something meaningful and constructive. I see that as slowing down politics and creating more deliberative politics. How we deal with political institutions. I do not happen to think it is about direct democracy, I am not in favour of direct democracy. It is about what I have called direct representation, which is creating a form of representation that fits the period in which people do not have to travel for five days to get to the central parliament, but now they can go online, they can get there and everybody is in contact with everybody else. We need now to make our institutions and our representational system a conversational system. I think all that is possible. I do not see that as a problem, I think that there will be a huge appetite for it. I think the problem has been the political lead, and not only the lack of political lead, but clear political opposition. Governments across the world have essentially stood in the way of it. The European Union has stood in the way. With or without Britain being in, the European Union has a major democratic deficit. It is possibly one of the best government experiments that we've seen in the last 100 years, and yet it fails on basic democratic principles. It has enough money and brilliant people to create new structures of communication that could show the rest of the world interesting ways of doing this, but it has not done it – it has resisted it, because the Commission and a number of institutions have been institutionally conservative. So I am optimistic because I think that, in a sense, people right now have to ask themselves a question: "Do we go one way or do we go the other?" A democracy is always incomplete. I have never believed that we have a democracy. I believe that the best thing we can have is a democratic aspiration, and it is an ongoing project. So, we are lucky: in your country and in mine – we vote for someone, we elect, we hope. But that is only a first rung of the ladder. There is a lot more, it is about deliberation, it is about recognition and it is also about markets... It is about taking on some of the powerful forces. We have moved so far, in the last 30 years, away from a political

economy approach to the media. Maybe we have moved too far. We have adopted quite rightly a much more cultural analysis, a much less positivist analysis, which is not governed by simplistic socio-demographic analysis, but on the other hand we have to face the reality that markets are socio-economics structures that have enormous constraining implications. So the question is how do we deal with those. How do we tame it? We are not going to get rid of it, but what we might be able to do is create controls. One of the main functions of democracy over the last couple of hundred years is that you control it. You create public education, you create universities, you create public service media and now on the internet we need to create public services online spaces as well.

A autora

Alessandra Aldé is a Master and PhD in Political Science from IUPERJ, professor of the Post-Graduation Program in Communication at UERJ and editorial coordinator of Compolítica journal.
ale3alde@gmail.com