

Book review

Discourse & Society

1–3

© The Author(s) 2026

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

journals.sagepub.com/home/das



N. Carpentier and J. Wimmer, *Democracy and Media in Europe: A Discursive-Material Approach*, Routledge Focus: London, 2025; 140 pp., £49.99 (hbk); ISBN: 9781032779263

Reviewed by: Xin Zhang, *Jinan University, China*

DOI: 10.1177/09579265261427113

The book under review explores how democracy in Europe is shaped by what people express through media as well as by the material systems that make this communication possible. These material systems include news organizations, broadcasting technologies, and digital platforms. It is the focus on digital communication via social media and other online platforms, setting out ways for users to engage with politics, that makes this contribution timely.

The book under review is grounded in Discourse Theory (DT), developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985). Unlike Critical Discourse Studies, which often begin with a close analysis of specific texts, DT works at a broader political-theoretical level. It examines how political meanings gain authority, shape public life, and remain open to contestation over time. From this DT perspective, media matter because they shape how political ideas are made visible, debated, and taken up in public life (Carpentier and De Cleen, 2007; Dahlberg and Phelan, 2011). Historically speaking, discourse-oriented empirical studies in media research have paid less attention to the material conditions that shape who can and cannot take part in public communication (Carpentier, 2017). For example, studies by de Jonge and Gaufman (2022) and by Krzyżanowski and Ekström (2022) trace how far-right populist narratives enter mainstream communication, but do not examine the platform design features - for example, recommendation feeds on social media platforms - which may facilitate the spread of such ideas. Carpentier's (2017) earlier work addresses this gap through the concept of the 'discursive-material knot', which treats communication and material conditions as inseparable. The concept captures how political ideas such as democracy are co-constituted through material arrangements, including technological resources, organisational settings, and institutional rules. Drawing on insights from new materialism (Bennett, 2010; Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012), Carpentier further argues that technologies and environments are active agents that enable, constrain, and organise social practice. In his 2017 study of community media participation

in Cyprus, Carpentier shows that democratic participation relies not only on public debate, but also on specific material arrangements such as broadcasting equipment, shared studio space, and media governance practices that determine who gets heard.

Building on this foundation, the book under review develops this body of work beyond local case studies into a systematic discursive-material framework for analysing democracy and media across diverse European contexts. By using the same discursive-material perspective for both democratic processes and media systems, the book shows how democratic communication is shaped by political ideas and material conditions. The book is organised into two symmetrical parts, each consisting of five chapters that follow the same analytical sequence. Both parts move from defining core components to examining internal struggles, identifying enabling conditions, and outlining external threats, eventually concluding with a visual summary. This mirrored structure is used to optimally show how democratic practices and media systems are structurally connected and mutually reinforcing.

Part I applies the discursive-material framework to democracy, encouraging readers to understand the latter as a dynamic and contested political project. By conceptualising democracy as an “empty signifier” (Laclau, 1996: 36), the book argues that its meaning is continuously shaped by struggles over representation, participation, political community, the state, and liberal rights. This perspective reframes democratic tensions as constitutive features of democratic practice itself. One central tension lies in the persistent imbalance between elite-led forms of representation and demands for broader participation. Following this, the book makes visible the material conditions that enable or constrain democratic participation, including access to resources, trust in political institutions, and the presence of a democratic culture that supports non-violence. When these conditions are unevenly distributed, democratic participation becomes harder to sustain. Finally, the section focuses on processes that undermine democracy. It shows that declining participation, persistent inequality, and the recentralisation of power are not external disruptions. They result from how democracy is structured, resourced, and governed. By integrating struggles over the meaning of democracy with material conditions, part I offers readers a systematic way of analysing democratic practice. It shifts attention from crisis narratives to the everyday political arrangements through which democracy is sustained or weakened. Seen in this way, democratic practice cannot be separated from the communicative systems that shape participation, visibility, and political conflict.

It is precisely this idea that motivates Part II, which applies the same discursive-material perspective to European media systems, including journalism and digital platforms. It begins by explaining media as interconnected systems that link technologies, organisations, professional practices, and audience participation. In digital environments, audiences are no longer positioned as recipients only, but as active participants whose visibility and engagement are shaped by platform design. It then critically examines democratic roles commonly attributed to journalistic media and digital platforms, such as informing citizens, enabling public debate, representing social diversity, and supporting participation. These roles are increasingly contested in platform-structured public communication spaces, where commercial logics and algorithmic design shape visibility and civic engagement. The section then turns to the material conditions under which these democratic roles can be sustained. The sustainability of journalistic

infrastructures is treated as a condition for the continued production of public-interest news. The growing dominance of large digital platforms shapes visibility and access in the public sphere. Shared norms become conditions when they are embedded in journalistic practices and platform rules, shaping who can participate. When these conditions become misaligned, media's capacity to support democratic communication declines. Economic concentration limits media diversity by narrowing ownership and editorial perspectives. Platform dominance reorganises visibility through ranking and recommendation systems. Disinformation, AI-generated manipulation, and online hostility further erode trust and discourage participation. Taken together, the authors argue that these dynamics show how media systems reorganise who can speak, what becomes visible in the public sphere, and how political conflict is structured.

For scholars in discourse theory and political communication, the book's main contribution lies in showing how DT can be systematically connected to the material organisation of media systems and democratic participation. Media and democracy are jointly shaped by platforms, economic concentration, and technological design. In this sense, the book moves beyond text-centred analyses and provides scholars with a framework for examining how democratic participation is constrained by specific communicative environments. However, the study has certain limits. Within a relatively short volume, it covers both democracy and media at a high level of abstraction. Readers who are less familiar with media and political theory may find it demanding, and the book could have included more detailed case studies. These limitations also point to a direction for future research, namely applying it to richer empirical analyses of media and democratic practices.

References

- Bennett J (2010) *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press.
- Carpentier N (2017) *The Discursive-Material Knot: Cyprus in Conflict and Community Media Participation*. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Carpentier N and De Cleen B (2007) Bringing discourse theory into media studies. *Journal of Language and Politics* 6(2): 265–293.
- Dahlberg L and Phelan S (eds) (2011) *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics*. Palgrave.
- de Jonge L and Gaufran E (2022) The normalisation of the far right in the Dutch media in the run-up to the 2021 general elections. *Discourse & Society* 33(6): 773–787.
- Dolphijn R and Tuin VDI (2012) *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*. Open Humanities Press.
- Krzyżanowski M and Ekström M (2022) The normalization of far-right populism and nativist authoritarianism: Discursive practices in media, journalism and the wider public sphere/s. *Discourse & Society* 33(6): 719–729.
- Laclau E (1996) *Emancipation(s)*. Verso Books.
- Laclau E and Mouffe C (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso Books.