

# THE MEDIA AS A POWER FOR DEMOCRACY

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## **Introduction**

This essay is concerned to consider how far the common description of the press as one of the “powers” of government is helpful in understanding the role of the media in the contemporary world. As the term “Fourth Power” itself suggests, any discussion of this topic is necessarily concerned with the relations between the mass media and the exercise of power in a society. Power, in this context, is usually thought of as primarily political, but there can of course be many other forms which impact upon the lives of the population equally with, or even more acutely than, the deeds of governments and judges. Within that vast range of possible modalities of power, I am here concerned with those forms of power which are exercised in public social relations. Political power is certainly one of these, but there are forms of bureaucratic and economic power which also have this public character. It is self-evidently true that the exercise of power, either in the narrowly political sense or more generally, is not necessarily subject to any sanction or control.

My interest in this topic probably reflects a common-sense understanding of what is at stake in that it arises out of a concern with how the media may play a role in democratic political life. In my view, the mass media are necessarily constitutive of any adequate contemporary theory of political democracy. It is not possible to advance even the most limited and formal definitions of democracy which do not recognise the integral role of the media to the actual functioning of all of its elements. Whatever is of value in thinking about the media as a “power” is judged first and foremost in the light of this concern. While I thus begin from a consideration of the narrow question of government, the consequence of any serious attempt to explore what is at stake in this issue drives the debate onto the wider and more general terrain of public power in general.

This discussion therefore considers some of the historical circumstances surrounding the origin of the doctrine of the separation of powers before considering how this has come to be

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extended to include the mass media. It then reviews the implications of the three different terms that are used to cover the same general area of concern and considers what they reveal about the contemporary world. Finally, an effort is made to sketch the outlines of a different usage that might address some of the problems discovered with the three existing terms.

## Historical Origins

The classical doctrine of the separation of powers is commonly taken to originate with John Locke and to find developed form first in Montesquieu and then in *The Federalist Papers*. In fact, it seems to have been present, in essence if not in name, in much earlier political thought, being traced in some accounts back to Plato. In considering the application of the doctrine to the contemporary world, we need to bear in mind three important aspects of the political realities the separation of powers sought to theorise.

Given that it was, in substance, a reflection upon the constitutional arrangements of seventeenth and eighteenth century Britain, it is clear that it had only a tenuous relationship with any recognisable model of democracy. The executive power during that period was essentially in the hands of the monarchy which, despite the fact that it owed its position to the will of parliament, was based on the principle of hereditary rule. A powerful element, perhaps the most powerful element, in the legislature was the hereditary House of Lords. The only element subject to any kind of external sanction was the House of Commons. This was subject to periodic election by an extremely restricted gender and property-based franchise in which votes were commonly and publicly bought by candidates. Many seats were literally in the gift of powerful landed magnates.

Secondly, although in no way a democratic theory of politics, the separation of powers sought to embody in constitutional theory very real conflicts of interest. We may appreciate the issues at stake if we consider the disposal of military force. All participants in the British politics of the day held, for good historical reasons, to firmly Maoist principles about the relationship between political power and the barrel of a gun. In the early modern world, as is the case today, the use of military force was clearly the prerogative of the executive. To allow the monarch a free hand with this was widely recognised as tantamount to an invitation to tyranny and popery. Consequently, the deployment of military force was constrained by the most elaborate battery of laws. Military officers held their commission from the Crown. (They still do.) On the other hand, the power of the officers to enforce the obedience of their troops derived from the Mutiny Act, which formed the basis of military law. (It still does.) Unlike the vast majority of laws, the Mutiny Act was subject to annual renewal by parliament. Without the renewal of this Act, the Executive could not, in theory, run an army. The Crown's control of military force was thus placed on very short notice (Barnett 1974, 124-25). The fact was that parliament was frightened of kings: after all, it had had to use military force to depose two of them in the half-century between 1640 and 1690.

The separation of powers was one of the mechanisms by which parliament made sure that there could be no British equivalent of the despotisms of the European

