

## Digital-Age Resistance: Journalism, Social Movements and the Media Dependence Model

Reviewed by Marta Fiolić<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Andrew Kennis’s most recent book, *Digital-Age Resistance: Journalism, Social Movements and the Media Dependence Model*, is a comparative study of several case studies using a novel model of news analysis called the Media Dependence Model, which Kennis himself hypothesized and developed in his doctoral thesis (Kennis, 2011) and has since been refining and updating.

**Keywords:** Digital age; journalism; social movements; Media Dependence Model.



Andrew Kennis is an international investigative journalist and researcher specializing in Digital Journalism Studies, Political Communication, Political Economy, Global Media, and International Communications. His experience as both scholar and practitioner allowed him to build a theoretical framework that is innovative and creative while keeping abreast of global developments in the news media ecology firsthand. The case studies and comparative analyses he presents us with in his most recent book, *Digital-Age Resistance: Journalism, Social Movements and the Media Dependence Model*, are based on the novel model of news analysis called the Media Dependence Model, which Kennis himself hypothesized and developed in his doctoral thesis (Kennis, 2011) and has since been refining and updating. Inspired by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky’s “propaganda model” (1988) and W. Lance Bennett’s “indexing model” (1990), and seeking to combine the theoretical assets of political economy with the empirical and methodological benefits of political communications, Kennis shaped “a living model, fully meant to be applicable and of use to understanding, analyzing, and criticizing today’s news media coverage” (Kennis, 2022; p. xli-xlii).

<sup>1</sup> Marta Fiolić is a PhD student in Communication Sciences – Cinema & Television at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences – NOVA University of Lisbon, an FCT fellow and a member of Cinema & Politics: Philosophical Approaches working group at CINELAB – NOVA Institute of Philosophy. Contact: [marta.fiolic@fsh.unl.pt](mailto:marta.fiolic@fsh.unl.pt)

The significance of *Digital-Age Resistance: Journalism, Social Movements and the Media Dependence Model* lies precisely in the series of case studies and comparative analyses, showcasing the potential of the media dependence model as a theoretical and analytical tool. Alongside the model, Kennis brings another novelty into the scholarly discourse – the exploration of the role today’s social movements could have in the expansion of mainstream media interests, cracking the dependencies on the elite political circles, and pushing towards the much-needed media reform. Finally, the book prompts critical, and harsh, reflection on today’s media coverage but does not fail to present recommendations for remedies and new possibilities.

The contemporary media landscape is marked by a complex interplay of power dynamics and informational influences. Traditional (and elite) media, alternative outlets, and social media coexist in this dynamic and multifaceted environment, each contributing uniquely to the ways information is produced, consumed, and circulated in our society. At the same time, the promise of the “age of information” is visibly transitioning towards an “age of misinformation.” And as a society, we still must grasp what all this could mean for journalism, for social movements, and for our democracies. Here lies the key theoretical presumption of the book – in the necessity of having access to an independent and autonomous media system for “the healthy ethos of any functioning democracy” (Kennis, 2022, p. 8). This presumption follows Robert W. McChesney’s idea of the “rich media/poor democracy paradox” and his argument that “the media have become a significant anti-democratic force in the United States and, to varying degrees, worldwide.” (McChesney, 2016). McChesney himself acclaims Kennis’ book and writes the preface to it, describing it as nothing less than “an intellectual self-defense” against disinformation and propaganda. Another significant endorsement is the foreword written by Daniel Chomsky and Noam Chomsky, who tie Kennis’ book to their own scholarly effort and set the scene for the main topics to be examined and explored throughout the book – the state of mass media (old and new), the opportunities and obstacles of social movements, and the crisis of democracy.

Andrew Kennis presents us with an overview of the state of modern digital, social, and news media, laying the groundwork for the critical examination of different types of media coverage. He does it through policy analysis and case studies on topics such as Trump’s family separation policy, 2019’s social movements in Hong Kong, Puerto Rico, Chile, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Iran, Greta Thunberg and #ClimateStrike, #CancelRent movement during the pandemic, #OccupyWallStreet, etc. Throughout the book, he offers additional insight into the distinctions and similarities between the early digital age and the social media era, draws from these comparisons, critiques the mainstream news media system (principally in the US, but also globally), and not just advocates for necessary media reform but offers detailed and elaborate policy analysis and recommendations.

**“Hey ‘Prof,’ what news should I read and trust?”**

In a contemporary era when information is seemingly abundant, everywhere, and easily accessible, the issues with print, broadcast, and social media journalism are understandably receiving a lot of attention. To navigate in this media landscape, news media literacy has become “such an urgent and yet daunting necessity” (p. 17). In the first chapter of the book, Kennis portrays the new media landscape in the US in the 21st century as “nothing short of ominous” (p. 18). Through the analysis of the unprecedented wealth growth of Silicon Valley’s “corporate conglomerate digital platforms” such as Apple, Google, Microsoft, Meta, and Amazon, he postulates that to understand this current media landscape, it is necessary to acknowledge how this wealth transforms into power and influence over traditional media networks. At the same time, he contests the “long-running conventional wisdom” connecting social media (and user-generated content) with the demise of the institution of journalism. Kennis instructs the reader to look back to the nineties, specifically to the Clinton-era 1996 Telecommunications Act, subsequent corporate media concentration and takeover of daily newspapers, and of course the financial importance of corporate advertisers in mainstream media, which got highlighted in the post-2008 global recession. This means that the corporate takeover of journalism and its subsequent abandonment of it preceded not just the social media frenzy but the internet itself. The conglomerate digital platforms simply swam with the tide. Thus, although the crisis in professional journalism is identified and lamented as continuing, Kennis’ argument throughout the book will be that “saving” or “expanding” the corporate control of the news media “to the point of it going once again beyond just the globally branded, elite news media outlets is not a solution at all in the grand scheme of things” (p. 23). Interestingly, the “elite news media outlets” like the “big tree” – The Washington Post, The New York Times, and The Wall Street Journal – escaped the fate of local and regional daily newspapers, and “in an ironic twist of fate, their collective future is finally being strengthened by the very “platforms” that significantly ate into their digital advertising profits in the first place” (p. 34). Kennis suggests that this alliance, and its importance regarding the news and information we receive and how we receive it, is here to stay. It is worth mentioning, though, that the outsiders to this profit-oriented media landscape, like nonprofit, public interest, and public affairs-oriented news outlets, managed to avoid some aspects of the ongoing crisis and still show development and even growth, but since they largely fall outside the media dependence model’s critique due to their “distinctive structural qualities and related journalism practices” (i.e. high-impact, independent and investigative-oriented journalism), they are significantly less present in the book’s analyses.

### **Worthy or Unworthy?**

As a media analysis tool, the Media Dependence Model and its predictive components and critical analysis are solely applicable in studying mainstream news media and commercial press – this could include any mainstream or influential news

outlet, nationally distributed and globally branded dailies (e.g. The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal), commercial and national newsweekly magazines (e.g. Newsweek and TIME), or globally branded and commercial news outlets, major news networks, and cable news channels (e.g. CNN, Fox News, ABC, CBS, NBC, MSNBC). Special attention in the book is reserved for the social movements and their “worthiness” in the eyes of these types of media, considering how they operate in close relationship with the “power,” be it political or economic. The principal argument here is that “there are dichotomous patterns that are consistently detectable in elite mainstream news media coverage on social movements” (p. 53). Generally, the movement will be “worthy” of media attention if it is aligned with the interests and positions of the sources of power, whereas, if contrary, it will be “unworthy” of coverage. But besides covering the basic tendencies and weaknesses of mainstream news media and commercial press, Kennis introduces the concept of “press exceptionalism” – “most often caused when otherwise “unworthy” social movements manage to organize and obtain critical levels of mass resistance and popular opposition to the point where leading public officials, and in turn the elite mainstream news media, have no choice but to pay attention to and respond to them.” (p. 54).

In the contemporary media landscape, this movement or resistance does not necessarily have to have masses on the ground; the online-based resistance can enter the equation. As is shown in various chapters of the book, we can observe the direct link between the sudden gain of “worthiness” and the rise of social media, or better, as social movements learn to use the age of social media to their own advantage, public officials and elite mainstream media are being forced to give them attention. And although this is not free from limitations and constraints, corporate advertising and generally market-based orientation have professional journalism in their grip, and more often than not, the policy outcomes were not as hoped for; the media dependence model analysis and its conclusions bring about a better understanding of the causes of these institutional flaws, the news media performance, and “the shortcomings of the world’s mainstream news media system and an essential facet of the democratic ethos of our society” (p. 83).

Additional significant setbacks for the civic culture, but at the same time, the guidelines for future research and the implementation of possibly healthier policies for accessing important news and information are tackled in a somehow distinct chapter on net neutrality. Kennis poses the topic of net neutrality as “important yet all too often overlooked” and argues that “the future of the internet in regard to net neutrality is intimately linked to the future of independent and professional journalism” (p. 284), and thus “by extension the sanctity of democracy” is at stake here too (p. 302). This question gains increased importance because, as is shown, independent, online-based and non-for-profit journalism progressively fill in some of the gaps and failures noted in the mainstream news media. In this regard, he presents a disturbing case of influence and impact on the internet environment regarding access to news and information, when the lack of regulations and forthright violations can bring about blocking,

throttling/discrimination, providing zero-rating packages, paid prioritization, and fast-lane practices that give preferential treatment to determined internet content. For Kennis, the prospect of the restoration of the net neutrality policies in the US is described as a “feeble and uncertain matter” (p. 291), which sets the tone for the analysis. And although he stays in the US context, based on his analysis, it would be interesting to further explore and broaden the debate, looking into worldwide trends in net neutrality policies.

This discussion on net neutrality could easily be added to the debate around deliberative democracy and digital technology. Political and social analysts already acknowledge that while new media indeed shows certain benefits, stimulating democratic participation in society, at the same time it also comes with pioneering surveillance devices that offer increased modes of control, both to governments and authorities and corporations (Roberts, 2014). The hope that Kennis offers through his case studies is that the “preponderance of mass resistance and social movements is here to stay in the era of social media” and that spontaneous rebellion as well as organized and global resistance “often results in more reform and change than what can even be garnered by non-governmental organizations lobbying on behalf of the public interest” (p. 355).

However, these “victories” are still somehow limited and come after extraordinary efforts. To make considerable progress, “it will take both persistence and recognition of this landscape,” as Daniel and Noam Chomsky conclude in the Foreword (p. xxxv), a landscape in which the media system is growingly concentrated and conglomerated around a handful of media giants and even a smaller group of respective owners, where public interest is trumped by commercialism and profit, a landscape so clearly beneficial to the spreading of misinformation and disinformation, and the formation of echo chambers and a growing number of media deserts.

I would conclude that precisely here lies one of the most important accomplishments of this book – it offers researchers, students, policymakers, grassroots organizations, activists, media makers, or concerned citizens alike not just an “an intellectual self-defense,” but also a comprehensive study of this particular media environment that we live in, through solid and in-depth case studies, that paints a clear, although agonizing, picture of what is at stake, if we do not work diligently for an actually critical and independent news media system.

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