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Book Review

Emotions, Media and Politics

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen

Polity Press, Cambridge, 2019, 220 Pages¹

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Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, the author of *Emotions, Media and Politics*, worked as a journalist in Denmark and the United States, and received her Ph.D. in Communication from Stanford University. She is currently a professor at the School of Journalism, Media and Culture, Cardiff University, UK. Her investigation and research shows a consistent interest in the relationship among media politics, journalism, and emotions. She became interested in reconstructing Jürgen Habermas' famous idea of the "public sphere" in terms of feminist theory, and positioned the newspaper's "letters to the editor" as a forum for public debate. In her first book, *Journalists and the Public*, which is based on her Ph.D. dissertation, she analyzed the conditions for participation in the public debate via letters to the editor through a survey of the letter selection process. She found that in the public sphere, which should be open to all people who are interested in the issues and where rational discussion is expected, emotional letters were preferred and selected.

After this study, during her research on public debate and citizen participation in the age of digital media, she became more interested in the concept of "antagonism" (Mouffe, 2005) in radical democracy (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Emotions such as "anger" and "hatred" that divide "us" and "them" became the central theme of her research. Through these shifts in interest, she has focused on the position and role of emotions in the study of media politics and journalism. This book is the result of her analysis of the news and social media.

Why, then, is "emotion" such an important idea in the study of media politics and journalism today? It is for a deeper analysis of the realpolitik that is unfolding at the moment. Beginning with the rise of contemporary populist politics, as represented by the "Trump phenomenon" and "Brexit," academic attention has been

¹ We translated this book into Japanese. This review is based on the translator's afterword in the Japanese version of *Emotions, Media and Politics*.

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drawn to the “anger” expressed and represented in a wide range of political phenomena, including social movements like “#MeToo” and “Black Lives Matter.” In conjunction with the post-truth situation, media plays a central role in these political phenomena. Social media diffuses the emotions of populists and participants through hashtag activism. A series of events is widely shared in society through mainstream news media with participant’s emotions. However, it may also include the anger and distrust that populist politicians and social media users often direct at not only existing political/social order, but also mainstream media. In any case, the “politics of emotion” through media is attracting attention, and its mechanisms and functions are being considered.

On the other hand, in terms of tackling the analysis of “emotions,” the study of media politics, especially the relationship between news media, including journalism, and politics, is one of the most lagging areas in social science. As for social science as a whole, the research trend that places emotions at the center of analysis has grown in depth over the past few decades. Sociology has been at the center of this trend till date. The sociology of emotions, represented by Arlie Hochschild’s prominent research *The Managed Heart*, which is often mentioned in this book, has developed while involving other social science fields such as political science and anthropology (Okahara, Yamada, Yasukawa & Ishikawa, 1997:3).

Although analysis of “emotions” in social science has developed, the study of media politics and journalism has not regarded “emotions” as important. This is in contrast to cultural studies, which were among the first to respond to this trend, and have been engaged in their research in response to the recent “affective turn” (cf. Ito, 2017, 2018).

The reasons for the lack of analysis of “emotions” are detailed in this book. First, due to the influence of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, there has been an implicit assumption in the study of media politics and journalism that sees “emotion” and “rationality” as dichotomous, and values the latter as desirable in a democracy. Secondly, there was a dominant principle or philosophy of objective journalism that events can and should be represented “objectively.” These have functioned to make emotions irrelevant or invisible in these fields. However, against the backdrop of today’s eruption of “politics of emotion,” there is a growing demand to tackle the analysis of “emotions” in the study of media politics and journalism.

The outline of this book can be summarized as follows.

Introduction and Chapters 1 to 3 examine the perspectives and concepts for analyzing emotions in news. The Introduction and Chapter 1 discuss why emotions are important for media and politics. Referring to trends in the study of emotions in humanities and social sciences, the significance of focusing on media, especially the news, is demonstrated. It clarifies the processes by which emotions are constructed, socially contested, or shared, and their political consequences. Chapter 2 examines how emotions are embedded in journalistic practices or represented in news texts,

using the concepts of “strategic ritual” and “emotional labor” as clues (Tuchman, 1972; Hochschild, 1983). In Chapter 3, she discusses how personal narratives have become more authentic and empathetic, using several media representations as examples.

Based on these perspectives and concepts, Chapters 4 to 7 focus on the contemporary aspects of media politics. Chapters 4 and 5 focus on anger as an emotion, showing that anger, as represented in the media, is not always considered “irrational” and is often justified. On the other hand, the media coverage of the “Trump phenomenon” includes more expressions of “anger” than ever before. By expressing anger, Donald Trump appeals to a wider range of supporters through the media. She also points out that this expression of anger has been made possible by the transformation of the “emotional regime” of political society as a whole (Reddy, 2001). In addition to these expressions of anger, Chapter 6 focuses on “love,” a positive emotion. Here, the actual and potential political involvement of audiences and social media users is discussed based on the study of fan culture. Chapter 7 points out that the architecture of social media is behind the spread of such emotions like anger and love through these platforms. In addition, social media companies have designed their systems to promote people’s positive emotions to earn profits, and the chapter discusses the consequences of this on people’s political participation and political debates.

As mentioned above, this book persuasively argues why it is important for the study of media politics and journalism to examine “emotions.” It is characterized, first, by the presentation of diverse findings not only from the “Trump phenomenon” and hashtag activism, but also through extensive case studies ranging from Pulitzer Prize-winning articles to social media. Second, the book utilizes interesting analytical concepts and strategies in each case study, such as “angry populism,” “strategic ritual of emotionality,” or “emotional management through social media architecture.”

Needless to say, this book is a starting point for the study of media politics and journalism on emotions, not an endpoint. Further empirical analysis should be conducted in this area. Analytical concepts and theories will also need to be deepened in consideration. For example, the framework presented in this book is useful in analyzing the media discourse surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. During the pandemic, there was fear and anger about the disease in many countries, including Japan. It is necessary to examine how these fear and anger were expressed in the media and how media played a role in spreading these emotions in society. In many other events and incidents, various emotions are expressed in media and widely shared through coverages. Thus, the framework can be used for analyzing a wide range of cases, from the local to the international, and it can be said to have presented an important framework in the research field of media politics, and journalism.

However, it must be pointed out that the mass society theory, which had a great influence on the early development of the study of media politics and journalism, has not been sufficiently referred to in this book. In mass society theory, the mass consists of people who act emotionally and are regarded as a problem for democracy. In terms of emotions, the theoretical influence on these field must be deeply considered. In dealing with these topics, Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, for example, needs to be mentioned critically. Careful consideration should also be given to whether we can say with certainty that emotions have been dismissed as "unnecessary" in past studies. Furthermore, the question of what the problems and possibilities of emotions in the media mean for democracy must be considered.

Of course, how to deepen and develop this new theme, both academically and practically, is our challenge. This book provides us with a general framework for this purpose, as well as some useful clues to analytical concepts and strategies.

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