

PhD Defence: “The Right to Authentic Political Communication” by Ann Rees

Vu Thuy Anh Phan

School of Communication
Simon Fraser University

Our dear colleague, Ann Rees, will defend her PhD dissertation on Friday, January 22nd, 2016 at Harbour Centre, Room 1315 (1:30pm). Here is the abstract of her dissertation “The Right to Authentic Political Communication”.

Abstract

Increasingly, governments communicate strategically with the public for political advantage, seeking as Christopher Hood describes it to “avoid blame” and “claim credit” for the actions and decisions of governance. Strategic Political Communication (SPC) has become the dominant discourse in political communication between government and the public, during elections and as part of a “permanent campaign” for public support and political power. This dissertation considers the implications of SPC for deliberative democracy, including the ability of the public to scrutinize government and hold it to account as part of the process of legitimating government. The central questions which shaped all aspects of this dissertation are why, and how citizens in a democracy have a right to authentic information that allows them to understand how they are governed. The argument takes a multi-disciplinary approach that encompasses national and international rights jurisprudence; communication rights theory, in particular concerning communicative action (Habermas); authentic deliberation (Dryzek); arguments for and against critical citizenship (Tully, Norris and Schumpeter); and political studies, including deliberative democracy and legitimation of government (Dewey). Methodologies include multi-disciplinary literature reviews; primary records obtained through the Access to Information Act (ATIA); media monitoring; database analysis and process tracking through elite interviews with government and news media actors. Chapter two considers rights history and theory, including jurisprudence and communication theory on the role of authentic information as the basis of reasonable deliberation (Young) and legitimation (Dunn). Chapter three concerns the history, theory and application of SPC tactics such as political marketing (Scammell, Kozolanka) and “blame risk” avoidance (Hood). It also focuses on communication actors: the “negativity bias” (Hood) of political journalists and “positivity bias” of SPC partisans who seek to control information access. Chapters four and five are case studies of political communication in the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) of Stephen Harper. Chapter six considers secrecy, and successive executive branches’ resistance to Canada’s ATIA. Chapter seven argues that managing risks of representation necessitates public access to authentic communication, whether or not it enhances public trust. The conclusion makes recommendations intended to facilitate the public’s right to know through greater government transparency and authentic political communication.

Keywords: communication rights; strategic political communication; authentic deliberation; deliberative democracy; Access to Information; transparency