

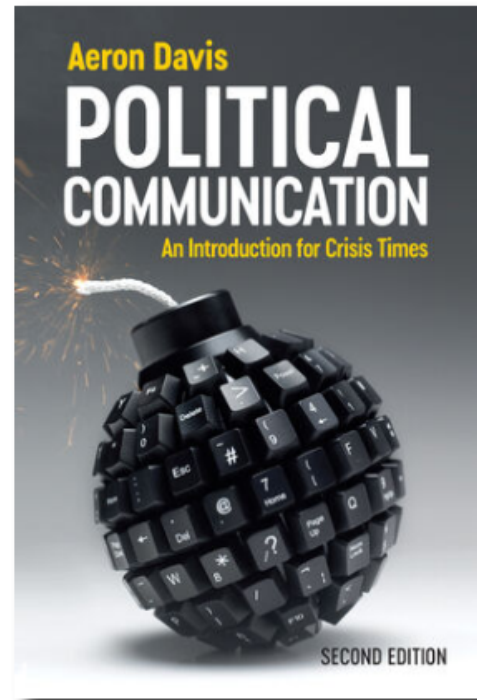
Aeron Davis, **Political Communication: An Introduction for Crisis Times** (2nd ed.), Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2024, 242 pp., \$69.95 (hardback), \$26.95 (paperback), \$22.00 (eBook).

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In the second edition of ***Political Communication: An Introduction for Crisis Times***, Aeron Davis argues that contemporary democracies are no longer experiencing normal cycles of political change but are facing a deeper structural crisis that is reshaping political communication. Expanding on the first edition (Davis, 2019), and building on Jay Blumler's (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995; Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999) work, the author reframes the field around what he calls "The Fourth Age of Political Communication," an era characterized by digital technologies that fragment publics, undermine legacy media, and empower volatile electorates. The book is both a normative intervention and a synthesis of recent political communication scholarship; Davis argues that established assumptions about democracy, media, and political power no longer match today's political reality.

The book engages a long-standing debate in political communication about whether current democratic developments represent normal change or a deeper crisis (see also Blumler, 1997). Davis's book aligns more closely with work on post-democracy and democratic backsliding, which sees recent political changes as signs of structural decline rather than temporary disruption (Bermeo, 2016; Crouch, 2020); by contrast, classical political theories such as Polybius's concept of *anacyclosis* viewed constitutional instability as cyclical and ultimately self-correcting (see Podes, 1991). Davis' argument seems to depart from this tradition; such cyclical interpretations are no longer adequate for understanding contemporary politics. The author argues that since the mid-2010s, symbolically marked by Brexit and Donald Trump's election, multiple tipping points have been crossed. These include the hollowing out of party systems, the erosion of journalistic authority, the concentration of digital platform power, and the normalization of affective and antagonistic political communication. Drawing on comparative data, historical trends, and major political shocks (e.g., the global financial crisis, COVID-19, the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine), Davis asserts that these changes undermine not only democratic institutions but also the conceptual frameworks that have structured the discipline (of political communication) itself.

One of the book's main strengths is its ability to connect political economy, media systems, and democratic theory. Rather than treating digital media as a neutral or purely technical shift, Davis situates communication within broader power structures shaped by neoliberalism, globalization, and market forces. Throughout the book, political communication is understood as the outcome of structural conditions that



shape who speaks, who is heard, and whose interests matter. This perspective distinguishes the book from more media-centered or effects-driven analyses and allows Davis to trace common patterns across parties, journalism, activism, and citizen engagement.

Pedagogically, the book is well suited for advanced undergraduate and graduate teaching. The diagrams, discussion questions, and suggested readings make the book easy to integrate into coursework.

The opening chapter sets the tone by arguing that traditional political models, mainstream media institutions, and expert forecasting failed to anticipate the upheavals of the last decade. The introduction positions these failures as symptoms of a deeper misalignment between democratic theory and contemporary political realities. Davis introduces the idea of “the fourth age of political communication” (p. 13) to capture a shift toward fragmented publics, weakened intermediaries, volatile electorates, and a loss of shared epistemic foundations. Importantly, he frames this as a historically contingent transformation shaped by political choices and economic structures, as opposed to a technologically deterministic argument: the media is the message (see McLuhan, 2017).

Chapter 2 revisits core democratic ideals such as liberty, equality, and a “shared” public life, drawing on Jurgen Habermas’s theory of the public sphere, comparative political theory, and democracy indices to show how different systems organize these values in practice. Davis emphasizes that democracy is always a compromise between ideals and reality, but he argues that growing media fragmentation and polarization are placing new pressure on the communicative foundations of democratic legitimacy. Chapter 3 builds on this argument by rejecting both technological determinism and techno-optimism. While digital media have expanded access and participation, they have also intensified inequality, surveillance, polarization, and platform power. As a result, the Internet’s early democratic promise has given way to a hybrid system in which old power structures re-emerge through new technologies.

Chapter 4 traces the long-term transformation of political parties from mass, socially rooted organizations into professionalized, centralized electoral machines. While this shift improved campaign efficiency, it weakened party-citizen relationships and reduced ideological clarity. After the 2007–08 financial crisis, these trends reached a tipping point, producing electoral volatility, fragmentation, and the rise of populist challengers.

Chapter 5 addresses the crisis of trust in political journalism, arguing that “fake news” is less a problem of outright fabrication than a symptom of structural changes in news production. Davis integrates liberal-pluralist, political-economy, and organizational perspectives to show how commercial pressures, time scarcity, and dependence on elite sources distort reporting. Digital disruption has accelerated these pressures by collapsing legacy business models and eroding journalistic gatekeeping. The result is a fragmented information environment in which verification, depth, and credibility become difficult to sustain.

Chapter 6 extends this analysis by revisiting theories of media management and mediatization. Davis argues that both frameworks now have limited explanatory power in a hybrid communication system where legacy media and political institutions no longer dominate. Instead, politics and journalism alike have converged toward emotional appeal, personalization, and entertainment logics (conditions that

disproportionately benefit populist actors while deepening cynicism and disconnecting symbolic media politics from substantive policymaking).

Chapter 7 challenges narratives of political apathy by reframing disengagement from formal institutions as a rational response to institutional failure. While voting and party membership have declined, many citizens remain politically active through protests, civil society, and digital engagement. Davis offers a balanced discussion of media effects research, acknowledging both the limits of direct influence and the enduring role of media in shaping issue salience, frames, and polarization. Chapter 8 shifts attention to organized power in civil society, arguing that contemporary democracies increasingly resemble “public relations democracies” in which corporate and elite actors dominate agenda-setting through resources, insider access, and professionalized influence campaigns. Chapter 9 examines activism and the third sector, showing how digitally enabled movements can reshape discourse and participation even when they struggle to achieve durable policy change.

Chapter 10 traces the retreat from late-twentieth-century globalist optimism toward renewed nationalism, geopolitical conflict, and fragmented international communication. Chapter 11 concludes by diagnosing a “post-truth,” “post-public sphere,” and “post-democratic” condition, characterized by declining trust, weakened institutions, and democratic backsliding in both established and newer democracies.

Despite its many strengths, the book’s crisis framing occasionally risks analytical compression. By grouping diverse developments under the banner of democratic crisis, important variation across regimes, media systems, and civic cultures can be flattened. The rise of extremist parties, for example, is not inherently undemocratic if electoral processes remain free and electorates retain the capacity to remove leaders from power. From this perspective, populism may reveal democratic vulnerability without fully negating democratic agency. Readers more sympathetic to participatory or affective models of political communication may therefore find Davis’s assessment of citizen capacity somewhat pessimistic.

Relatedly, while the concept of “the fourth age of political communication” is compelling as a diagnostic framework, it is less developed as an explanatory or predictive model. The book excels at describing what has changed but is more tentative about how these conditions might stabilize, evolve, or be restructured. This limitation functions less as a flaw than as an invitation. Davis explicitly positions the book as a call for theoretical renewal rather than a closed system.

Overall, *Political Communication: An Introduction for Crisis Times* succeeds as both a critical synthesis and a provocation. It challenges scholars to rethink foundational assumptions about media, democracy, and political power under conditions of sustained stress. For students and researchers seeking to understand political communication beyond campaign effects or platform affordances, Davis’s book is an essential and timely contribution.

Given how quickly the political landscape is changing, including the second election of Donald J. Trump, the dismantling of long-established policy norms, the continued expansion of artificial intelligence, and so on, a third edition seems not just likely but necessary.

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