Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Book Review - Standard

Karin Wahl-Jorgensen
Emotions, Media and Politics
Polity Press, Cambridge 2019, ISBN: 9780745661049

Few recent publications on emotions are as topical and timely as this book is. Besides its important contribution to scholarship on emotions, Wahl-Jorgensen's *Emotions, Media and Politics* represents a significant theoretical advance of the research on media and communication, particularly in light of major important political turmoils such as Brexit in the UK and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Drawing on a series of original studies, the book navigates the complex emotional landscape characterising the relationship between emotions and politics; a relationship which is mediated and shaped by several media practices. Indeed, whilst situated within the growing interdisciplinary scholarship on emotions, this contribution focuses specifically on what the author defines in terms of "mediated emotions" – that is, those emotions which are discursively constructed, crafted and circulated for a specific purpose – suggesting a new research agenda on this basis and attempting to develop new conceptual and methodological tools.

The book is articulated in seven main chapters, the majority of which is based on the analysis of empirical examples. Chapter one sets the scene, illustrating the cultural changes accompanying the role of emotions in the history of Western thought – from neglected to central phenomenon – and highlighting how the "affective turn" (Clough, Halley 2007) has increasingly involved cultural studies, humanities, and social and political sciences. Despite the growing and justified interest in the role of emotions across several disciplines which has characterised the last decades, scholarship on the relationship between emotion and journalism or news media in general has been slower for several reasons, which are explained in the chapter. Such relationship, is the assumption, is key to grasp political life and political decision-making. Wahl-Jorgensen highlights the necessity to understand the complex relationship between specific emotions – positive or negative – and politics, and clarifies the role of "mediated emotions" and "mediated politics" in shaping journalists' practices, news' format and the reception of the audience. In doing that, she also sheds light on the links between particular emotions and particular forms of political participation and expression.

The first, introductory chapter is followed by a series of chapters providing examples of ways in which these dynamics between emotions, media

and politics are enacted. In the second chapter, the power of emotions as a fundamental force underpinning, structuring and producing mediated public life is exemplified by looking at Pulitzer Prize winners – allegedly considered as templates of good journalistic practices and markedly relying on emotional storytelling. There is a price involved in that, which is represented by the ways in which the journalists' emotional expression is disciplined and hetero-directed by strategic scripts and by the consequent emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) involved; nevertheless, such emotional labour is often outsourced to members of the public authorised and somehow even invited to publicly express their emotions. Emotional storytelling is described as central to visualise certain social and political issues and making them relevant to the audience, through compassion. The importance of personalised and emotionalised storytelling is further analysed in chapter three, which shows its connections with the concept of authenticity. Authenticity is defined in terms of specific features which foster trust in media content and make use of emotions in a convincing manner. Personalised and emotionalised storytelling, which includes several types of formats and sources emerging from the audience itself, is perceived as more authentic and creates a sense of community, a sense of belonging through the feeling of compassion which fosters social and political change. The discursive construction of authenticity – through people's stories – assumes various forms which end up becoming a political strategy where emotions are central to bring about positive change. Chapter four, then, turns to examining the role of a particular type of emotion, characterised by its double-edged sword nature in politics: anger. Having defined "mediated anger" as a performative, political, discursively constructed form of anger created through journalistic narratives, the author develops a typology of mediated anger, distinguishing between legitimate and rational anger and illegitimate and irrational anger and clarifying, in this way, the Janus face of emotions: never definable as either positives or negatives in themselves, but only in their premises and outcomes. In chapter five the (ever present) role of anger to understand political life is discussed in light of Donald Trump's election, which represents an example of new, emerging forms of angry populism as well as a shift in the "emotional regime", a concept introduced by Reddy to describe the emotion norms, rituals and practices necessary to support a stable political organisation (Reddy 2001). Chapter six jumps from "anger" to "love" and tries to clarify the role of *positive* affective bonds in shaping political discourse and engagement. It does it by looking at two specific examples of political support: fan discourses around former British Labour leader Ed Miliband on Twitter and Donald Trump's support from Reddit[1] members. The final chapter examines the "emotional architecture" of social media, that is, the ways in which a set of deliberate design decisions of Facebook structures the emotional tenor, expression and interaction of its users. More specifically, it analyses how Facebook's platform and emoji reactions structurally encourage specific forms of emotional expression and shape public debate and the public sphere. The chapter also attempts to show the connections between the emotional architecture of social media, the encouragement of positive and pro-social forms of expression, and the commodification of emotional labour on Facebook. In the conclusions, the author provides nine propositions which summarise the main conceptual, methodological and epistemological implications emerging from the book and suggest recommendations for future research on these topics.

This book certainly possesses all the potentialities to move the complex debate on the role of emotions in media research at a new level, as it shows the necessity to take personal feelings seriously in order to understand political decision-making processes. And yet, there are several dimensions which do not seem to be granted the attention they would deserve. For example, the role of social class (as well as other sociological variables such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, etc.) is not thematized and problematized, whereas at least a preliminary and provisional understanding of how new media technology may interfere with social distributions of wealth, capital, and power would be required. Most likely, material, cultural and symbolic capital are not as relevant as we might be tempted to think in determining the affective behaviours and strategies in the context of a *mediated public sphere* where contrasting violently the others seems to be more important than looking for and supporting objective facts; a mediated public sphere where the sense of belonging and the divisions between *insiders* and *outsiders* (see also Ahmed 2010, 2013) are more relevant than any form of cultural capital. Nevertheless, the (absent) role of social

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[1] A large and exponentially growing online community. See Wahl-Jorgenson 2019, p. 138.

class and other sociological variables could have been at least mentioned as one of the acknowledged potential limitations of this work[2]. This absence seems to suggest the opportunity for further research, and, more specifically, the necessity to articulate the research here presented towards a more critical, gendered, racially sensitive approach aimed at situating the media' affective phenomenology in the context of late capitalism and neoliberism. Sadly, this was not Wahl-Jorgensen's project.

A relatively limited problematization invests also some concepts, such as, for example, Goleman's concept of "emotional intelligence", described as key to journalistic work without an adequate critique of this contested concept. The book's declared aim is understanding the role of emotion in shaping *political discourse* and action or *engagement*, but the concept of engagement remains a bit vague and the book does not always clearly and satisfactorily address it as it does with the concept of political discourse. Moreover, whereas it is understandable that covering all the gigantic literature on emotions would be out of the scope of a book specifically focused on *emotions, media and politics*, many relevant scholars are not mentioned and not always sufficient emphasis is given to those who are. Ahmed, for example, is merely introduced, but not adequately discussed to highlight and further clarify the intrinsic ambivalent nature of emotions and its multiple implications. Moreover, whereas the Janus face the feeling of anger is clarified, the ambivalent and ambiguous nature of love is not.

The rationale for a specific focus on "anger" is explained – although one would have liked to hear something about other cognate feelings such as fear, frustration, resentment and hatred – but a clear rationale for a specific focus on "love" is not provided. If it is true that the book «moves towards a more nuanced understanding of the role of emotion in shaping political engagement by looking at the role of positive affective bonds» (p. 17), the total absence or mention of other positive affective bonds is not easily comprehensible. In general, the choice of focusing on specific emotions raises analogous concerns of previous and current scholarship on emotions which makes use of a similar approach (see, for instance, Scheff 2000, 2003 and Scheff and Retzinger 2000). The affective experience is made of more emotions at the same time, mutable emotions, and human beings do not experience emotions in an isolated manner, one at the time. Emotions do not constitute *static* realities but rather *dynamic* processes that occur and change over time, through chains of events, and should be analysed as such. Approaches that discuss emotions as if they were static things with static labels tend to locate affective dynamics in factors external to the person and to treat them as collective phenomena rather than as (also) individual phenomena. Anger is described as «a political emotion which serves to explain and sometimes justify the actions of protesters [....] *and* has become a viable explanatory framework for understanding political life, representing a shift in the "emotional regime" towards emerging an form of angry populism» (Wahl-Jorgenson 2019: 89) The underlying assumption that structural factors account for the emotions does not answer to the question of how single individuals – through their interactions – constantly construct and deconstruct emotions as a lived experience as well as a form of consciousness.

Besides, there is, at times, the impression that the importance of the role of media and media technologies is slightly overemphasized without providing a clear explanation of what is really new about "mediated public life". Emotions and the construction of political opinions have always been inherently mediatized. But there is something inherently specific about the current historical, social and cultural period which is not always coherently highlighted and discussed. The author talks about different "emotional cultures" and "emotional regimes" (Reddy 2001), but then she seems to confine her analyses within the boundaries of Trump's "angry populism" without developing an in-depth analysis of the (novelty of) current "media regime" (Delli Carpini 2018). Thus, for example, if during the last few years broadcasting media had roughly equal market shares of social media in terms of news consumption, the real impact of the latter on society is far from being fully grasped. In this sense, what we need here is a better understanding of how media and new media technologies are generative and propagative of new *styles* of affectivity and political speech, new ways, in other words, in which emotions intersect new forms of communication and public arenas (see also Mühlhoff's interview, in Kemmer *et al.* 2019). There are aspects, then, of the transformation of media and the public sphere which are not adequately problematized and coherently dis-

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[2] On the relationship between emotions and social class see also the classic Sennett R., Cobb J. (1972) *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, New York: Vintage.

cussed throughout the book. Some examples: the decline of news consumption, the tabloidization of news, the decline of press freedom and of trust in media and journalism, the selective exposure to news and opinions.

In general, notwithstanding an excellent introduction in which an overview of the book is provided, the chapters sound a bit disconnected and, despite the useful (and, at times, meticulous) explanations provided in each chapter's introduction and conclusion, the book remains closer to a collection of articles assembled *ex post* than to a homogeneous and coherent piece of work with a clear narrative. The attempt to create a coherent narrative linking the different chapters is undoubtedly made, but it is not always successful. This is combined with some redundancies throughout the book and some considerations which sound simultaneously predictable and assertive. The conclusions themselves, for example, provide nine main general propositions which seem to represent a simplified version of what could have been a more critical, open-ended and thorough synthesis of the many interesting ideas and concepts discussed in the book. Just by having a look at some of headings ("Emotions matter to mediated politics"; "Emotions are everywhere in mediated politics"; "Anger is the essential political emotion"; "Love motivates us to engage in politics", etc.) we get a sense of how they may say – at the same time – too much and too little.

That being said, and beyond some of the above-mentioned limitations, the book offers some excellent and insightful clues for further reflection well worth discovering. The importance of putting emotions at the centre of research agendas in media and politics is charmingly explained by recurring at both theory and empirical research; the performative nature of "mediated emotions" and the typology of "mediated anger" are brilliant examples of how theoretical soundness and empirical innovation can and should go hand in hand; and the new research agenda developed by the book arrives at a historical moment where the role of media in shaping the emotions affecting our social and political lives becomes particularly relevant. In sum, Wahl-Jorgensen provides us with a timely and inspiring compilation of empirical findings based on a remarkable conceptual background, bringing current debates on the role of emotions in mediated politics at a higher level and shedding light on realities that future theoretical and methodological formulations ought to confront.

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