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Title	Democracy and Media in Europe: A Discursive-Material Approach, by Nico Carpentier and Jeffrey Wimmer
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Publication date	2026-09-04
Original Citation	Bubanović, M. (2026) 'Democracy and Media in Europe: A Discursive-Material Approach, by Nico Carpentier and Jeffrey Wimmer', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 31, pp. 112–117. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.10
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.31.10
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Download date	2026-11-07 14:36:02
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/19156



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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 31, 2026, pp. 112–117
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.10

Democracy and Media in Europe: A Discursive-Material Approach, by Nico Carpentier and Jeffrey Wimmer. Routledge, 2025, 140 pp.

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Democracy and Media in Europe: A Discursive-Material Approach explores struggles over democracy and the roles that media play in these contestations. As the authors recognise, this topic is of high importance in today's complex political environment, where the prerogatives of traditional nation-states are being brought into question and media systems are increasing their capacity to reach global audiences.

As the title of the book suggests, the work is theoretically underpinned by insights originating from the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, which posits an omnipresence of discursive struggles in constructing the meanings of phenomena in the social world (Jorgensen and Phillips 6–7). Discourse theory is further enriched by a concern for the materiality of discursive practices, drawing influences from the new materialist philosophical theories, which reject the view of the material as passive and stable (Bennett 20). Such a framework allows the authors to not only look into the discursive struggles over the meaning of democracy, but also how these meanings are performed and contested in a wide array of material practices, ranging from direct participation to signification in the media systems as machines of social production, reproduction, and change (Carpentier and De Cleen 274). Moreover, a close relation is established between the discursivity and materiality of these practices by utilising the notion of a discursive-material knot, which introduces the fluctuating interconnectedness of material and communicative elements of social reality construction (Carpentier 4). This allows the authors to seamlessly cross between the constructions of democracy itself and the democratic roles of the media systems, and to posit them as necessarily interconnected in the contemporary understanding of European political arrangements.

Carpentier and Wimmer structure their work into two parts. Part I spans five chapters and focuses on the construction of democracy itself. In the first chapter, they set out to define core components of democracy. Reflecting on their embeddedness inside the European liberal-democratic tradition, the authors acknowledge the normative position they take when establishing these core components. In the second chapter, the struggles over the meaning of these core components within democracy are highlighted. With the importance of these struggles, stemming from the discursive theoretical position in view, the multiplicity of minimalist and maximalist approaches to democracy is discussed and compared with respect to each of the core components. The third and fourth chapters utilise the notion of the condition of possibility and that of a threat stemming from contingency. Thus, these sections deal with

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the conditions that enable democracy to exist as such and the dislocations originating inside and outside of democratic discourses that threaten its stability.

Part II uses the political and philosophical reflections presented in Part I to posit the importance of democratic roles of the media in the preservation of democratic rule. Considerations presented in this section are considerably more elaborate, demonstrating an advanced ability in the academic study of media. Mirroring Part I, the section goes over core components of media systems as such and their democratic roles. Discussion of the political struggles over democratic roles of the media follows, and makes visible the highly unstable character of these meanings. As with the treatment of democracy in Part I, the second section concludes with an extensive discussion on the conditions of possibility and threats to the media's democratic roles.

Part I opens with a statement on the indeterminate nature of democracy as a discursive and material practice. From there, the authors argue for the constitutive nature of four components: co-presence of representation and participation, presence of a political community, citizen rights, and rule of law. Each of these components is a further point of negotiation between discourses within the democratic discourse, but the contestation also comes from the non-democratic discourses. The authors show the openness of democracy, which is arguably the most fundamental condition of its existence, presenting how different discourses divided by minimalist/maximalist and procedural/substantive dimensions change the meanings of its core components.

After positing that democracy is a discursive-material assemblage, Carpentier and Wimmer utilise the notion of condition of possibility to argue that material decentralisations and stabilisations, legitimacy of the state, existence and participation of political community, as well as democratic culture and its value discourses, although existing outside of democracy itself, enable and shape its very existence. The authors also recognise the instability of these conditions of possibility.

The discussion in the fourth chapter is underpinned by recognition of the fact that decentralisation of power relations makes democracy highly open to threats, both internal and external. An informative analysis of Jacques Derrida's notion of the democracy-to-come is given (78), and further elaborated upon by deploying the psychoanalytical notions of fantasy and *jouissance* posited by Jacques Lacan (245). The ever-pertinent topics of non-participation and political apathy are contextualised as threats to the articulation of democracy as presented by the authors. Attention is then given to contemporary efforts to re-centralise power and limit the political community by positioning populist efforts within the argument at hand.

The first part of the book concludes by problematising antagonistic relations and instead introducing a possibility of non-antagonistic approaches to conflict in a democratic political system. This ambitious undertaking in the realm of discourse theory opens up questions of interest to the post-structuralist political philosophy, but leaves them open, inviting further theoretical considerations.

Part II of the work, dealing with different types of media and how their democratic roles are constructed, presents the reader with more elaborate argumentation. This is made clear in the authors' successful integration of the core components of democracy, its conditions of possibility, threats, and struggles into the roles that the media play in both supporting and suppressing further democratisation of society.

The discursive-material theoretical approach is on full display in the authors' combination of the ideological-discursive with material elements to offer the definition of media as an assemblage and extract its core components: interconnectedness of material technology with signifying practices and organisational infrastructures, as well as audiences as political actors and users. The authors also draw attention to the rise of the digital and stress its influence on the increasingly complex media landscape, and the potential impact it may have on the democratic roles of the media. The theory of the public sphere is strongly present in this part, not only through the considerations of Jürgen Habermas, but also those of subsequent authors who have continued to broaden its application.

Media's democratic roles are analysed as objects of struggle between maximalist and minimalist, and substantive and procedural approaches to articulating democracy. As these theories and practices are elaborated upon in the first part of the book, their impact on understanding how media support democracy is described in rich detail throughout Chapter Seven. The informative role of the media, control over those in power, its role in facilitating democratic debates and struggles, its representational role, as well as its role in facilitating public participation, are dealt with in a well-argued manner through the prism of the two aforementioned dimensions, thus providing media and communication scholars with a rich overview from which they might draw upon in their research.

The same is the case with the struggles over constructions of pluralism, media freedom and freedom of speech, pluriformity of representations, and the construction of participatory intensities. The authors list and analyse multiple struggles in each of these locations, creating an elaborate extension of the prior arguments on the core components of democracy, their relation to the democratic roles of the media, and the discourses that might change their meaning.

Part II closes by listing the conditions of possibility of media's democratic roles and the threats to these roles from both inside and outside the democratic discourses. Unsurprisingly, considerations of the conditions of possibility and threats reflect the analysis of conditions to and threats for democracy itself given in Part I. However, these are further enriched by a strong presence of the material dimension in considering the need for economic sustainability of the media assemblages, struggles over the construction of what counts as political knowledge, as well as the inclusion of the notion of the public sphere to analyse the impact which (re)centralising discourses and capitalist logics may have on the possibilities of democracy supporting media.

In conclusion, Carpentier and Wimmer have written a work of substantial importance to Media and Communication Studies, which showcases the potential of the discursive-material theoretical approach. The wide array of concepts relevant to democracy and democratic roles of the media allows for a comprehensive overview of the topic from an underexplored theoretical perspective and points towards the topics that may be of interest to scholars looking to engage in discursive study of the field.

Likewise, the broadness of the selected theoretical conceptualisations of democracy and the media's democratic roles is of use to both active scholars and students engaging with the matters at hand. It offers scholars an overview of the entrance points to discourses engaging in the constructions of meaning of both concept assemblages. In addition, the work offers a perspective on material practices and their contingency, constitutively tied to the discursive-ideological practices described as enabling or threatening democracy and the media's democratic roles. To students of media and democracy, the book offers an overview of

theoretical approaches and clearly shows how they relate to one another. As such, it explains the interconnectedness of the two fields.

However, a considerable understanding in the field of Discourse Studies is required for the full appreciation of this work's contributions, even if the style of presentation is more readily understood than that of Ernesto Laclau, whose discourse theory is one of the fundamental sources for the work at hand. On the other hand, the less technical language leaves some discussions open-ended.

Firstly, while the authors claim to be highly sensitive to a normative position taken up in their theoretical conceptualisation of democracy, it is not fully explained how this particular articulation of democracy stems from within the theoretical framework. The authors stress that the articulation of democracy through the hegemonic liberal democratic model presented in the work is only one of the possibilities. However, if this statement is accepted without further argument, it remains unclear if other possibilities of articulation of democracy may stand on equal grounds in relation to the theoretical framework utilised. In contrast, when presenting their radical democratic model in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (originally published in 1985), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe appeal to the principles of their theory.

More precisely, their radical democracy is based on their conceptualisation of conflict and struggle (Laclau and Mouffe 186–88), and this further appeals to the claim that there is a principle of regulated dispersion within every discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 105–06). Therefore, if one were to argue against their radical democratic model, one would have to contest these theoretical underpinnings aimed to force the opponent themselves to state contingent articulations. Carpentier and Wimmer accentuate the importance of discursive struggles, but the discussion on the movement away from the politics of antagonistic relations presented in Chapter Three makes it less clear how the democratic model they argue for is embedded in the principles of the discourse-material theoretical framework.

Secondly, the brevity of this book and the large number of notions it encompasses leave little space for a more detailed analysis of the concepts of violence and participation. While the broad outlook is appreciated and useful, the text leaves the discussions on these two concepts open without exhausting important possibilities of their articulation. Concretely, participation, just as statehood, citizenship, and citizen rights, is also a legal institution constructed by political and other interests, while simultaneously constructing them in return. The approach taken in the analysis of participation accentuates the conditions for the perseverance of the legal and political frameworks that such participation maintains, but is not considered from the angle that might upset these legal institutions and interests embedded in them and constructed from them, while remaining liberal-democratic. Likewise, while violence is considered in four chapters of this book, the articulation of violence as a product of the liberal-democratic model is not expanded upon.

To offer a more detailed overview of the concept of participation in relation to the legal and political frameworks, the considerations of the Genoese school of Legal Realism, represented by authors such as Giovanni Tarello, Silvana Castignone, and Riccardo Guastini, may be a useful addition. In particular, this school of jurisprudence is strongly concerned with the acts of interpretation of legal provisions leading to the construction of the legal norms as their meanings (Krešić 835). As a realist school of jurisprudence, it calls for understanding law through its performance (Krešić 830). As such, this school of jurisprudence may arguably be

considered a potential source of valuable insights for the discursive-material approach, although other doctrines such as legal positivism and natural law may be consulted to add further context to contestations over the meaning of legal institutions.

Moreover, theoretical considerations of violence have a long history in military theory ever since Carl Philipp Gottlieb von Clausewitz produced his work titled *On War* (originally published in 1832), and may provide a more comprehensive treatment of this wide concept. Von Clausewitz (86–87) elaborates on the notions of conflict and politics by articulating violence as the means of war and conflict, for the purpose of politics.

Therefore, if the book is supplemented with these additional approaches to the theoretical concepts it tackles, it can easily serve as a theoretical frame supplying analysable concepts to a broad spectrum of research fields. However, even without these additions, the insights this work provides may prove useful to researchers who seek to examine the discursive constructions of media and their position within democratic politics.

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Suggested Citation

Bubanović, Martin. "*Democracy and Media in Europe: A Discursive-Material Approach*, by Nico Carpentier and Jeffrey Wimmer." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 31, 2026, pp. 112–117. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.10.

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