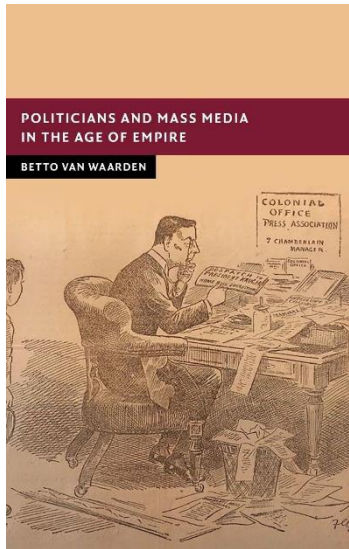




Betto van Waarden

Politicians and Mass Media in the Age of Empire
(New Studies in European History)

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reviewed by

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Betto van Waarden's »Politicians and Mass Media in the Age of Empire«, based on his PhD thesis at KU Leuven, takes the mediatization of politics across Europe, North America, and parts of the settler-colonial world around 1900 as its point of departure and focuses on the convertibility of mass-mediated attention into political authority. He reconstructs this conversion as both a promise and a risk for media-savvy politicians. Visibility could generate prestige, but it also escaped the control of those who sought to use it. The more political standing was produced through the media, the more susceptible it became to reinterpretation and scandalisation. Van Waarden thus examines a specific »window of opportunity« (p. 368) between the 1880s and the early 1910s, in which the mass press, visual media and imperial competition altered the conditions of political power.

At the heart of the book lies the thesis that, around 1900, a new type of »publicity politician« emerged, operating in »a system of ›transnational media politics‹« (p. 1). The author examines the German emperor Wilhelm II, his chancellor Bernhard von Bülow, the British politician Joseph Chamberlain, and Cecil Rhodes, prime minister of the Cape Colony, while Belgian king Leopold II and US president Theodore Roosevelt serve as comparison subjects. These key political players all read newspapers, cultivated relationships with journalists and became the subject of mass-mediated observation themselves. The »publicity politician« thus represents an institutionally grounded form of authority that increasingly had to assert its legitimacy in the public sphere.

Van Waarden sets this line of argument in eight chapters. The first four chapters trace how politicians utilised the press whilst, at the same time, entering into dependencies that were virtually impossible to control. Semi-official publicity work and confidential contacts with journalists persisted, but, in a commercialised mass media landscape, they lost much of their ability to exert influence. Speeches became available for extracts and commentary. Interviews opened up possibilities for self-interpretation while also risking their transformation into public

commitments. Drawing on key figures who actively helped shape this new order of visibility, the author demonstrates how closely media competence and loss of control were intertwined.

This tension is most clearly evident in three conflict constellations that van Waarden analyses as media events: the Jameson Raid of 1895/96, the Bülow–Chamberlain controversy of 1901/02, and the »Daily Telegraph Affair« of 1908. During the Jameson Raid, publicity itself became a factor in the crisis. Chamberlain, Rhodes, Kruger, and Wilhelm II sought, through targeted public interventions, to legitimise their respective positions and shape perceptions of the crisis. At the same time, the Kruger Telegram revealed the limits of such strategies: rather than strengthening the German position, it helped to bolster Rhodes and Chamberlain in the British press. The Bülow–Chamberlain controversy, in turn, demonstrated how increasingly difficult it had become, under the conditions created by telegraph and telephone, to address national publics separately. Statements circulated across national borders with near immediacy and were interpreted there against different political horizons of expectation. In the »Daily Telegraph Affair«, this communicative dynamic ultimately rebounded upon the institutional order itself. Wilhelm's remarks not only provoked transnational irritation; their mediated circulation also called the monarch's position into question within the German Empire and made the limits of monarchical political agency a subject of public contestation.

The second half of the book examines the function of political personae within imperial media systems. Here, Rhodes and Chamberlain appear as figures in which imperial politics was condensed. In 1901, Chamberlain could be portrayed in the »Daily Telegraph« as the figure who, more than any other, stood for imperialism. Around the same time, »The Empire Review« described Rhodes as »the personification of the imperial genius of England« (cit. p. 262). However, the same logic of personalisation could also be applied in the opposite direction. When Rhodes visited Berlin in 1899 to discuss his schemes for a Cape-to-Cairo railway with Wilhelm II, the hostile press coverage in Germany did not damage his reputation. On the contrary, it actually strengthened it, turning criticism itself into a measure of political significance. Imperial rivalry thus supplied the press with figures through which abstract world politics could be translated into recognisable narratives of societal self-description and enmity.

The source base of this methodologically reflective study is broad, yet here a tension becomes apparent within van Waarden's comparative approach. He combines press material from Britain, Germany, and Belgium with archival holdings from journalism and diplomacy. For quantitative approximations of media attention, he draws on digitised collections such as »The Times«, the »Daily Mail«, and »Belgica Press«, whilst explicitly acknowledging the limitations of this approach: German newspapers are less well indexed, many local papers have barely survived, and OCR hits cannot substitute for contextual reading. The inclusion of the Belgian press is intended to test what roles the political figures under examination played in the press of a »neutral« country (p. 31). Yet the comparative potential of this choice is not always fully realised. Rather than probing more closely how Belgian interpretative patterns might qualify the argument about shared media logics, the Belgian material tends primarily to provide further evidence for the cross-border circulation of political personae. This limitation matters insofar as van Waarden simultaneously argues that »evolving media logics« increasingly overlaid »newspaper differences in ›quality‹, ideology and nationality« (p. 31). This, however, raises the question of how far such shared media logics actually extended and to what extent their effects continued to be shaped by nationally and ideologically structured press publics.

This yields a twofold objection to the book's general line of argument. A first objection concerns van Waarden's inclusion of national factors that shaped the cross-border translation and appropriation of political personae. Such circulation did not, however, entail uniform political meanings. The German Empire would have provided a particularly demanding test case, since its media landscape remained strongly structured by partisan affiliations and socio-moral milieus. Van Waarden shows, for example, that both French and German newspapers could portray Rhodes as »the incarnation of the evil British Empire« (p. 265). Yet this shared personification does not in itself demonstrate that ideological or national differences had

become secondary. A more systematic comparison of conservative, liberal, and socialist readings within the German Empire might therefore have clarified whether common media logics overlaid established interpretative patterns or were themselves refracted through distinct political contexts. The Kruger Telegram points to a similar problem. In the British press, it could be read as an affront and a veiled threat to Britain's imperial position. In contrast, in Germany it could appear as a publicly staged gesture of national and monarchical self-assertion. A fuller consideration of such divergent appropriations would have allowed van Waarden to distinguish more precisely between transnational circulation and convergence in political meaning.

Secondly, van Waarden's concept of »political participation« is analytically too broad.¹ In the introduction, he argues that »the consumption of all this political news constituted a form of democratic participation«, and includes within this category the public's observation of prominent politicians, its symbolic »representation« through these figures, and the consumption of visual political culture (pp. 19f.). This brings together very different forms of political relationship under the same concept of participation. In the conclusion, van Waarden also notes that citizens were generally unable to respond directly to politicians; rather, the press attributed reactions to an imagined public and relayed them to political actors. Nevertheless, he describes this relationship of »non-reciprocal trust at a distance« (p. 363) as a form of democratisation. As a result, the analytical distinction between the observation of political actors, identification with public personae, reactions articulated through the press, and forms of actual political influence loses some of its sharpness. The »Daily Telegraph Affair« illustrates why this distinction matters. Here, reactions in the press and among the public did not remain at the level of observation and interpretation, but damaged Wilhelm II's political authority and strengthened the press's capacity to scrutinise the monarch. The transition from mediated reception to politically consequential feedback shows that different degrees and forms of participation need to be distinguished more clearly at the analytical level.

Van Waarden's insightful book, in sum, exposes a problem that extends beyond its own design. Its central analytical gain consists in reconstructing how precarious the conversion of media attention into political legitimacy had become around 1900. The »publicity politician« thus emerges as a threshold figure whose political significance depended on whether mediated visibility could be connected to mechanisms of accountability and to sociocultural arenas in which audiences learned to read mediated self-presentations as claims to political legitimacy. Against this backdrop, one aspect of modern media policy is characterised by a tense interplay of visibility and attribution that had already taken shape around 1900, before radio and television, as defining audiovisual mass media of the 20th century, gave this constellation a new intensity.

Zitierempfehlung

Christina Sigrid Schlaich, Rezension zu: Betto van Waarden, *Politicians and Mass Media in the Age of Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2025, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* (online) 66, 2026, URL: <<https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/afs/82161.pdf>> [8.9.2026].

¹ Cf. *Claudia Gatzka/Anja Kruke*, Repräsentation und Partizipation – ein Spannungsfeld der Demokratieggeschichte. Einleitung, in: *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 65, 2025, pp. 9–28.