

# Public Critique by Journalists and Politicians as a Process of Democratic Legitimization

The International Journal of Press/Politics  
2026, Vol. 31(1) 74–90  
© The Author(s) 2024  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/19401612241269895  
journals.sagepub.com/home/hij



Cédric Tant<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

This theoretical article takes a fresh look at the relationship between journalists and politicians, based on the public critique they level at each other. It proposes that this critique should be seen not simply as the expression of reproaches between rival actors, but as a meaningful metadiscursive articulation. Public critique means, for example, defining journalism, politics, democracy, or a particular context in which the relationship between journalists and politicians takes place. Above all, public critique is part of a process of legitimization that involves journalists and politicians, who are increasingly mistrustful of institutions. Associated with the public arena, public critique is also a tool for understanding new democratic dynamics driven by noninstitutional actors (citizens' movements or alternative media) that challenge the legitimacy of journalists and politicians.

## Keywords

public critique, metadiscourse, relationship between journalists and politicians, democracy, legitimization

The ambiguous relationship between journalists and politicians has been the topic of much research. These studies have examined the tensions and reproaches (Bastin 2002; Dakhli 2017; Legavre 1992) or the cooperation required by an interdependent relationship necessary for democracy (Bolz et al. 2017; Hubé 2022; Perloff 2017;

---

<sup>1</sup>Université libre de Bruxelles, Brussels, Belgium

## Corresponding Author:

Cédric Tant, Université libre de Bruxelles, 50, Avenue Franklin Roosevelt, Building D, Brussels 1050, Belgium.

Email: cedric.tant@ulb.be

Sigal 1973). Critical perspectives have also asserted the connivance between these actors (Bourdieu 1997; Herman and Chomsky 2002), which echo the growing mistrust of journalists (Esquenazi 1999; Matheson 2004; Thorbjørnsrud and Ustad Figenschou 2022) and politicians (Dogan 2005) throughout the Western world. However, most of these studies tend to see critique as the expression of a conflict caused by competition or interdependence. Few of them examine the role of critique not only within this relationship but also, more generally, in the public sphere and in a context of mistrust toward institutions (including journalism and politics). In addition, they often approach critique as a confrontation of professional practices (information versus communication, transparency versus privacy, etc.) without considering that journalists and politicians do not exercise “classic” professions. Indeed, they are part not only of democratic institutions that are the subject of many representations and fantasies but also of mistrust that deprives them of their democratic role (Zuckerman 2021). These gaps in the literature invite us to take a fresh look at both critique and the relationship between journalists and politicians, by approaching them through the lens of legitimacy. This article therefore aims to answer the following research question: to what extent does the public critique that journalists and politicians direct at each other represent a process of democratic legitimization in a context of mistrust of institutions?

As we shall see, the aim is to demonstrate that critique should not be seen solely as an exchange of reproaches, but as a process of articulation (i.e., the linking of signifiers) aimed at (re)gaining democratic legitimacy. This thesis is developed in four sections. The first defines public critique and proposes not to restrict it to a single moment of conflict but to make it a metadiscursive practice. The second section shows how the public critique is part of a process of legitimization that has become essential for journalists and politicians. Next, we return to the crisis of democratic legitimacy of journalists and politicians to understand the need to face up to growing mistrust of institutions. The final section emphasizes the role of public critique as a structuring element inside the relationship between journalists and politicians, whether it contains elements of tension.

As noted, this article sets out to theorize the relationship between journalists and politicians based on the notion of public critique. However, such an abstraction is only made possible by a foundation of concrete discursive practices. The article is thus based on an illustrative corpus taken from a doctoral thesis, which allows for such a generalization. Based on several polemics that took place in France, Quebec and French-speaking Belgium, and Switzerland, we analyze 944 media productions that contain numerous journalistic and political discourses. These productions come from five media channels: the press, radio, television, the web, and Twitter (now X).<sup>1</sup> Even though this is a theoretical article, illustrations drawn from the corpus will support the conceptual demonstration.

## Public Critique

Critique is the main subject of this article, and it is therefore necessary to begin by attempting to answer the following question: what does it mean to be critical?

As the preceding lines suggest, this article proposes not to restrict critique to the mere exposition of a reproach, but to conceive of it as a metadiscursive process (Blommaert 2005; Tant 2021). Blommaert (2005: 253) points out that a metadiscourse sets out how a “discourse should be interpreted, situated in relation to context, social relations, and so on.” Critique therefore makes it possible to reorganize the discourses surrounding a situation (Zienkowski 2018). For example, a journalist who criticizes a politician who has (improperly) accepted an advantage is not simply pointing out a fault, but is referring to “something else,” such as a context of mistrust toward politics, a mistrust that the politician’s “fault” risks reviving. As journalists and politicians play a democratic role, their critique is often linked to considerations of democracy. More precisely, we argue that this critique “articulates” democracy.

Articulation is a concept associated with discourse theory and the poststructuralist perspective of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). For them, articulation is the linking of discursive elements (or signifiers) in order to give them a particular meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Let us take two examples that rely on democracy and journalism. Articulated with direct participation, democracy does not have the same meaning as when it undergoes a similar process with representation. Journalism, on the other hand, can be associated with investigation, processing, and analysis, or the infallible transmission of the truth. These different articulations will give a different meaning to this institution. Articulations are very often used in public communications, especially for concepts whose meaning is not easily fixed, such as freedom, politics, journalism, and democracy. These so-called “empty signifiers” depend on contexts (social, cultural, historical, ideological, etc.) that help to give them meaning. The articulations also point to institutional ideals that are very interesting within the relationship between journalists and politicians. For example, following revelations about obscure political practices, a journalist might stress that politics should demonstrate greater integrity and transparency. Politicians might also want journalism to be associated with the raw transmission of facts, without journalistic treatment. Of course, these ideals are loaded with ideology and do not define journalism or politics. However, they are part of the exchanges that take place between journalists and politicians. To illustrate, let’s take the case of a candidate for the presidency of the French Republic who believes that journalists are “the most hated men and women in France<sup>2</sup>” (*Le Monde*, Johannès 2022). He addressed journalists as follows: “Who doesn’t love you? The people, my good friends. And they are right to be angry with you” (*Le Monde*, Johannès 2022). Based on this reproach, he explains the reasons for a growing distrust of journalists by saying that they are mostly left-wing and speak “politically correct” (*Le Monde*, Johannès 2022). Over and above these criticisms, this candidate produces a critique, in other words a metadiscourse on journalism (a metajournalistic discourse as Ogbebor (2020) and Carlson (2015) would point out) that links its actors with a lack of democracy (in the sense that journalists do not, in his view, meet the expectations of citizens).

Then, it is possible to define the public critique that journalists and politicians address to each other in the following way: critique proposes a metadiscourse (an articulation) that gives a specific meaning to certain notions (politics, journalism, the

relationship between journalists and politicians, democracy, etc.) from a certain perspective. Take a concrete example inspired by the corpus mentioned above: a member of a government is accused by journalists of having used public money to organize luxurious private dinners to which people from the cultural and the media sectors were invited. The journalists' allegations concerned excessive public spending, especially considering the climate of distrust toward institutions which characterize the country where the polemic takes place (France). The politician justified himself by explaining that the position of minister required a certain amount of representation, and that it was normal to spend public money to maintain a network with professionals in certain sectors of activity. He also accused journalists of not doing their job by not telling the truth and by attacking him personally, as can be seen in the following extract: "I believe in the virtues of investigative journalism for democracy, for investigating a topic. We take up a topic and then we cross-check, we question, we hold politicians like me to account and that's normal. But we're going to stick to the facts." (France 2 2019). This polemic generated numerous discussions not only in the press, on television, and radio, but also on digital social networks. As well as reproaches and faults, the public critique that is engendered articulates several elements, some of which have been pinpointed above: politics, journalism, democracy, a context of mistrust of institutions, and so on. According to some journalists, politics is associated not only with transparency and integrity but also with a context that is not favorable to institutional actors. They also believe that the purpose of journalism is not to attack someone but to tell the truth, in the audience (citizens) interest. In so doing, they are reaffirming their democratic role. For his part, the minister links politics with the need to respect his position, which requires him to spend money. He also believes that this position sometimes requires the use of splendor.

When journalists and politicians criticize each other, they "take advantage" of the opportunity to uncover metadiscursive elements (articulations) that give meaning to certain notions, particularly those which, in their view, can restore their legitimacy, as explained in the next section.

## **Articulating Democracy to Regain Legitimacy**

The first section showed that critique is not just a tissue of reproaches but a vehicle for metadiscourse. In what follows, the aim is to demonstrate that these metadiscourses articulate democracy to regain legitimacy and authority (at least in theory).

A great deal of scientific research has focused on legitimation and authority (Amossy 2022; Charaudeau 2005; Krieg-Planque 2013; Monte and Oger 2015; Oger 2021; Rosanvallon 2008; van Leeuwen 2016). Among politicians, legitimation is a common process that aims to reaffirm the legitimacy by mandate granted to politicians (Charaudeau 2005). This "imperfect legitimacy"<sup>3</sup> (Rosanvallon 2008) requires constant efforts to bring political practices in line with citizens' expectations. As we can see, in a context of mistrust of institutions, this process is even more important from a democratic point of view. Politicians increasingly must justify their practices or risk losing their legitimacy, for example, by demonstrating political transparency. On the

journalistic side, the challenge is similar as alternative media tend to be in opposition to the legacy media and to challenge their legitimacy (Tant 2021). Like politicians, traditional journalists are forced to act to (re)build their legitimacy, for example, through initiatives to get people involved in journalism or by giving a backstage access to the way in which journalism is produced.

Another difficulty that threatens legitimacy is the fact that society now manifests itself in the form of a vast array of minorities or minority groups (see Rosanvallon 2008). Taking account of these minorities is both an asset and a real challenge for public actors, who are judged on their ability to take consideration of these plural expressions (Amossy 2022). As such, a member of a Quebec party links the democratic legitimacy of a politician with his or her ability to be part of a “community” and to “be close to its citizens” (*Le Journal de Montréal*, Côté 2022). For Amossy (2022), the process of legitimization can take several discursive forms: ostentatious demonstration, reminder, consolidation, reinforcement, and so on. For its part, this article considers that by criticizing each other publicly, journalists and politicians produce articulations that participate in this process, which is therefore not only a descriptive act but also includes a construction part. Take, for example, journalists who claim to have respected the rules of journalism by respecting the truth. They produce a combination of articulations that relate simultaneously to journalism (they define journalism), democracy, and the democratic role of journalists (they play, their democratic role by telling the truth to the citizens), and their legitimacy (truth-telling, as a democratic journalistic practice, must be recognized and legitimized). The aim of this discourse is not simply to give a descriptive account of a practice. The journalist articulates concepts to legitimize themselves based on the democratic practices of their institution. In this sense, public critique is a metadiscursive manifestation of the legitimization process.

To refine and establish this point of view, we need to look at the concept of authority, which complements legitimacy and the legitimization process. Authority is the embodiment of “legitimised power” based on trust (Angenot 2013: 8, quoted by Amossy 2022: 7). More specifically, the relationship between authority and legitimacy is as follows:

Authority is based on legitimacy but is in a way an extension of it; and legitimacy leads to authority as the ability to be obeyed voluntarily, but is not confused with it. We know from experience that a leader can be recognised as legitimate without being able to make himself listened to and obeyed.<sup>3</sup> (Amossy 2022: 7)

Like legitimacy, authority fluctuates and is constantly under scrutiny by public actors. Journalists and politicians are increasingly faced with citizens’ initiatives that do not take them into account and displace the factors that create authority. This dynamic robs journalists and politicians of some of their legitimacy and makes it more difficult to assert authority. Yet authority—in other words, the ability to be listened to and positively influence behavior—is necessary for democracy. But authority without the trust of citizens does not serve democracy, because it is not/no longer recognized. Purely relational (Amossy 2022), trust must constantly link those in authority with the

citizens who recognize their legitimacy. In politics, such a capacity makes it possible to appeal to the consenting obedience of citizens (Amossy 2022). For journalists, the issue is just as important: if, according to Amossy (2022), the discourse of authority is based on the discursive *ethos* of a leader, in other words their image, which testifies to their ability to lead the governed to safety, the same *ethos* of a journalist testifies to their ability to inform citizens correctly. For example, in the canton of Geneva, journalists believe that a lie by a councilor of state (“*conseiller d’État*”) and an overly light-hearted response from that council “reduce confidence” in the entire institution, which loses legitimacy (*Le Courrier*, Armanios 2018).

Gaining legitimacy and asserting authority are part of public discourses. These practices are even more important as institutional actors are under constant threat of losing trust. Lack of transparency, being part of a media-political elite, being on a government’s payroll, etc. All these “faults” can lead to a loss of trust, legitimacy, and authority. Politicians and journalists are trying to curb this trend. In this sense, public critique, by articulating ideas and practices, such as the democratic roles of journalists and politicians, acts as a justification with the aim of preserving these two capacities of legitimacy and authority. When journalists make their practices explicit, explaining that journalism is “publishing the truth” (*Mediapart*, Arfi et al. 2019), they intend to demonstrate that those practices are indeed legitimate because they correspond to their democratic role. Through this metadiscourse, the journalist could regain legitimacy and authority.

Yet it is not so easy to determine what is legitimate and what can be considered as authority these days. Of course, this difficult identification is not new, but it is combined with a climate of mistrust that seems to be growing. For journalism, the idea of truth can sometimes seem secondary, overhung by an appeal to emotions in a posttruth era. The relationship between journalists and politicians is regularly confronted with this context, which makes it tricky to invoke the truth in public discourses. In the case of Donald Trump’s presidency, the meaning given to truth represented a real battle for public legitimacy, even though its importance could be called into question. It is also essential to note that the dual issue of legitimacy and authority arises even more poignantly in certain changing contexts (crises, technical changes, pivotal periods such as elections, among others). These examples and remarks show that the legitimate practices and which construct the figure of authority cannot be easily identified, even more so considering a public sphere which no longer consists solely of journalists and politicians.

In an incessant process of legitimization, public critique is a practice that seems useful to public actors. Journalists and politicians are demonstrating a public commitment (made to citizens) to reaffirming their democratic role threatened by a crisis of legitimacy. This point is discussed in the following section.

## Public Critique in a Context of Crisis of Democratic Legitimacy for Journalists and Politicians

Now that the process of public critique is clearer, we need to return to the crisis facing journalists and politicians, which help explain why they need to provide a discourse of legitimization. One might ask why politicians and journalists need to legitimize

themselves, and therefore to produce public critique. Therefore, this section highlights a real need to pursue a process of democratic legitimization while journalists and politicians see their democratic role increasingly being called into question by citizens and noninstitutional initiatives.

Let us begin by stressing the importance of considering journalism and politics not just as trades or professions but also as institutions, a choice that is not so common if we look at research into journalism. Indeed, few professions are accompanied by so many strong and stereotyped social representations (Grevisse 2016). Two authors help us to measure the weight that falls on journalists and politicians as institutional actors: Mauss (1969) and Douglas (1999). Mauss sees an institution as a set of instituted acts or ideas with which individuals are confronted and which are imposed on them (Mauss 1969). The second considers that these are legitimized social groups (Douglas 1999). To consider politics and journalism as institutions is therefore to recognize both the rules to which the actors are subject and to take account of their necessary need for legitimacy within society. It is undoubtedly this last point, more than any other, that distinguishes the institutional approach from other ways of looking at journalism and politics (through professional identities, for example). This approach makes it possible to understand the positions of journalists and politicians who claim to act in the name of a “democratic responsibility” that constrains them. In French-speaking Belgium, for example, all traditional journalists have decided to exclude from public debate political parties that are “liberticidal [. . . and] defend ideas that aim to destroy freedoms as they are conceived by the European Convention on Human Rights” (LN24 2022). The discussion that follows focuses on the democratic roles of journalists and politicians, who are responsible for these strong representations and are obliged to respond to expectations, at the risk of losing their legitimacy.

The democratic role of journalists has been extensively studied (Curran 2011; Derville 2017; Le Bohec 2000; McQuail 2006; Wolton 1991). For Rieffel (2001), journalists are “civic actors within societies”<sup>4</sup> and Touboul (2010) emphasizes the importance of their social role. Champagne (1995: 219) explains that journalistic activity is “recognised as a genuine institution of public utility necessary for the proper functioning of democracy.”<sup>5</sup> Politicians, for their part, represent citizens and act on their behalf (Bourricaud 1961). As well as playing a unique democratic role, the association between journalists and politicians contributes to democracy. Cayrol (1997) places the relationship between these types of actors at the heart of democratic life. The establishment and maintenance of democracy have been made possible by the joint and continuous work of journalists and politicians (see Wolton 1991). This is what Hubé (2022) has shown in Germany: the process of pacification of exchanges between journalists and politicians accompanied the democratization of the country. Understanding the relationship between the actors must therefore take account of the fact that they are not just any public actors but also democratic ones with a particular role, assigned and recognized by the citizens (i.e., in principle and historically at least).

However, this democratic role is constantly being called into question, and journalists and politicians are finding it increasingly difficult to be associated with it. Mistrust is directed both at their respective practices and at the “political-journalistic couple.”

Journalism is thus suffering from a disillusionment on the part of citizens (Matheson 2004), which has its roots in nonparticipation in journalism. As “representatives” of citizens (Cornu 1997), journalists need to create a sense of identification. Otherwise, their legitimacy is eroded (Esquenazi 1999). One way of responding to this crisis is to get involved in journalism, which could lead to a greater sense of identification. However, several studies have highlighted the complexity of such participation, and we must remain cautious about its effectiveness in countering the loss of trust in journalism (see Ahva and Wiard 2018; Carpentier 2011; Wiard 2022). On the political side, the mistrust lies in a crisis of representative democracy, as mentioned by Papadopoulos (2013). For politicians, the difficulty is as follows: as interest groups multiply and become increasingly singular (Touraine 1989), it becomes almost impossible to represent them all. Faced with this situation, institutional initiatives for participation in politics have been launched. However, these initiatives are far from satisfying the individuals and social groups they target. Dufresne (2017) has shown that European Citizens’ Initiatives are a source of disappointment, precisely because they emanate from institutions in which citizens do not/no longer identify.

This last point underlines the fact that the crisis of confidence is general and institutional. This observation also concerns the association between journalists and politicians, perceived as an emanation of the “elite.” Writers such as Bourdieu (1997) and Herman and Chomsky (2002) have taken a critical look at this association, describing the relationship between journalists and politicians, characterized by collusion and propaganda, as a brake on democracy. Of course, critical perspectives on the media and journalists have their limitations (normative, caricatured, situated in specific contexts, etc.) (see Lemieux 1999). Due to this, they bear witness to decades of questioning of the democratic role of these institutional actors. It is therefore appropriate to situate the critique that journalists and politicians refer to each other in a context where these two institutions are faced with a growing crisis of trust. This context is also conducive to the development of so-called “alternative political initiatives” that often develop in opposition to institutions, such as online political movements (Granjon 2021) and alternative media (Tant 2021). The dynamics of the relationship between journalists and politicians, and the critique they level at each other, can only be understood if this context is considered.

Public critique plays a role in this crucial process of legitimization because it exposes politics, journalism, or any other element linked to democracy. The examples presented in the first two sections highlight a real need to justify oneself, to gain legitimacy and authority. In this respect, as journalists and politicians try to assert their democratic role, public critique participates in their relationship, as the following section shows.

## **Public Critique as a Structuring Element in the Relationship Between Journalists and Politicians**

Thanks to some elements presented in the previous sections (critique as metadiscourse, articulation as an attempt at legitimization, journalism and politics as institutions in

search of legitimacy, etc.), it is possible to understand how public critique is rooted in political and journalistic discourses. We now need to show that this process plays a role in the relationship between journalists and politicians. The aim is to show that the special relationship between journalists and politicians is partly guided by critique as a potential means of (re)gaining legitimacy.

Let us start by looking at the relationship in terms of the way journalists and politicians blame each other. These criticisms can be divided into two categories: those relating to specific moments and those of a more general nature, concerning the role of the actors in the public sphere. The specific criticisms arise from a breach of the communication contract (Charaudeau 1994) between the actors. For example, journalists, who have historically been the privileged channels for politicians, may be denied the first opportunity to make an announcement (Bastin 2002). Dakhliia (2017) highlights the fact that politicians regularly use digital social networks such as Twitter to communicate to the detriment of journalists. This phenomenon is more striking given that journalists, who have a strong presence on this type of social network, constantly monitor politicians (Dakhliia 2017) and play a major role in their visibility (Roginsky 2021). Among politicians, blaming journalists can stem from a failure to respect the “off the record,” which is a more or less explicit request from a politician to a journalist not to divulge a piece of information. This is a long-standing procedure that is essential to a good relationship and association between journalists and politicians (Legavre 1992). This is a contract between the actors, and breaking it leads to conflict. Tensions may also lie in a more general vision of the public and democratic roles of politicians and journalists. For example, Legavre (2011) explains that journalists and politicians try to impose a “vision of history” (*“vision de l’histoire”*), based on mixed interests. These different objectives are made visible by the watchdog function of journalists, whose democratic role enables them to demand accountability (Currant 1991). Such a role inevitably generates tensions between the actors, one of whom (the politicians) must constantly justify its choices and practices.

However, these criticisms are not enough to qualify the relationship between journalists and politicians, which is, almost by nature, interdependent. Journalists need political sources to do their job (Saitta 2008) and politicians rely on journalists to communicate (Perloff 2017). As this point has been widely demonstrated and discussed in the scientific literature, there is no need to dwell on it but to answer one question: with the development of new technologies generating communicational changes that seem to offer greater autonomy to public actors, is this relationship still as interdependent as it used to be? In 2010, Small (2010) pointed out that the use of Twitter by Canadian politicians, particularly party leaders, was limited to the official transmission of information, and was therefore not part of the “Web 2.0 democracy” project. In other words, Twitter is not a channel for direct communication with citizens. Mercier (2015) notes that political communication on Twitter is highly polemical, in the sense of Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980: 10–11), that is, it conveys discourse imbued with “aggression, vehemence, and insults”<sup>6</sup> Looking at the 2014 municipal campaign in France, the author highlights this polemical character (Mercier 2015). As such, we must remain cautious about the widespread use of this means of communication in politics. Indeed,

the work of Small (2010) and Mercier (2015), as well as others, expose the many limitations of this communication channel (difficulty of debating, lack of real added value, risk of polemical slip-ups, etc.), and this is a brake on its widespread and exclusive use by institutional political actors. Langer and Gruber (2021: 334) have also shown that journalists continue to play an essential role in setting the political and public agendas by amplifying “the salience of the issue and, once in ‘storm mode’.” Roginsky (2021), for her part, highlighted the role that journalists continue to play in the public visibility of politicians.

To sum up, the relationship between journalists and politicians is characterized by an interdependence that has its moments of reproach and its moments of appeasement. Legavre (2011) considers that they are partners–rivals (“*associés-rivaux*”): conflicts that may exist between them do not mask a need for association; Charron (1994) would rather speak of negotiation. When tension emerges between the actors and manifests itself in public critique, it would therefore be wrong to focus solely on reproaches.

This article defends the idea that these studies should be enriched by public critique. In doing so, tensions and interdependence are addressed through the articulations of democracy. When there is controversy, the focus is not just on the sources of tension but also on what they say about democracy and the role of journalists and politicians. In Quebec, for example, a journalist who was blocked by the prime minister posted the following on Twitter: “Just discovered Premier @francoislegault has blocked me on Twitter. Was it after I wrote my latest story on the lack of a comprehensive cancer plan during the #pandemic? Was it earlier I don’t know. Glad Health @MinisterMcCann hasn’t. #FreedomOfThePress.” (Twitter, Derfel 2020). The public critique goes beyond the simple fact of having been blocked: it refers to the way journalism is done, press freedom, the watchdog role, and so on. This journalist is expressing a critique that is not directed solely at the prime minister, but at the public, the citizens who give legitimacy to their comments, their practices, and their democratic role.

Many examples highlight the desire to use relational tension to articulate aspects of democracy and to justify some practices. The canton of Geneva offers a telling example of the articulation of the democratic roles of actors (discussed earlier in this paper) with a view to justifying practices. When a member of his party was accused of accepting an advantage, the president of the party accused in turn journalists (and politicians) of lashing out in the media. However, he is also voicing a public critique that goes beyond this protest. Here is the most telling extract:

My opinion is that there is a need for calm on this issue. At the moment, everyone is saying what’s on their minds. We need to lower the tension and avoid a media tribunal. Everyone needs to stay in their place, in their function and in their role, be it the Grand Council, the Council of State, the press and, of course, the courts.<sup>7</sup> (*La Tribune de Genève*, Budry 2018)

This discourse clearly shows that public critique of the relationship between journalists and politicians is not confined to reproach, but produces articulations linked to

democracy: the need for serenity, respect for the roles (of the press, politicians or the judiciary), and so on.

Let's extend this example with the politician in question (the person accused of accepting an advantage), who does not appreciate the media treatment he receives. He publicly criticized this media treatment, while explaining that the procedure and agenda of each institution are different and must be respected. In an interview, he responded to accusations of slowness leveled at the government of which he is a member: "We have been criticised for waiting to speak. But when it comes to the facts of which I am accused [...] a government should be able to allow itself 6 days to reflect." (Léman bleu 2018). Another politician from a different political party agreed and publicly criticized the way journalists were handling the controversy:

A government must take the time to mature its decisions. There are legal acts drafted and, therefore, beyond the formal aspect, it was necessary to go beyond the emotion that, in the end, this admission provoked, with regard to his colleagues and the population.<sup>8</sup> (RTS 2018)

The public critique produced in this passage exposes democratic mechanisms, in this case the way in which a government functions. In doing so, the politicians justify taking their time and therefore respond to accusations, not just to address further reproaches in a logic of confrontation but also to articulate and justify a democratic role.

At the end of this article, it is worth emphasizing the plural nature of public critique. Indeed, public critique can potentially generate legitimacy at any time, through different and complementary processes. Legitimacy can be achieved by targeting a practice deemed to be at fault and highlighting what a profession can contribute to democracy, or by responding to a reproach that calls into question this participation in democracy. These nuances show both the richness of public critique and its complexity. Above all, it is important to be aware that public critique, like legitimacy, is contextual: the same articulation of democracy can sometimes be a source of legitimacy in a specific place and time, just as it can be a source of mistrust in other circumstances.

## Conclusion

This article takes a fresh look at the relationship between journalists and politicians through the critique they level at each other. The aim was to provide some answers to the following research question: to what extent does the public critique that journalists and politicians direct at each other represent a process of democratic legitimization in a context of mistrust of institutions? Public critique is a concept that reflects the complexity of the relationship between these actors. The article also invites to see the critique voiced by public players as a process of democratic legitimization. In this sense, critique is not just a reproach, but a participation in the public sphere as a place for constructing democratic public debate. Yet this process is being challenged by a context that is hardly favorable to institutional public actors. At a time when noninstitutional citizens' initiatives are developing, journalists and politicians have an interest in

reacting, at the risk of seeing mistrust of them grow.<sup>9</sup> In this respect, the article did not take into account the reception of public critique and therefore the legitimization process. Although this was not the objective set here, it is worth emphasizing the value of developing research that examines the way in which citizens perceive this legitimization mechanism. Indeed, given that only citizens can grant legitimacy, it would be useful to gain a better understanding of how they distribute it, according to what issues and in what ways.

From a scientific point of view, public critique offers a way to understand contemporary democratic dynamics. Without substituting the concept of public sphere, it provides a relevant perspective to look at the discourses (institutional or not) that shape democracy. As it is not solely linked to “spaces,” whether connected, disconnected, or even opposed, it allows us to take account of changes in participation in democracy, well beyond the relationship between journalists and politicians.

### Appendix. Corpus.

| Territories                 | Number of productions by type of media                                                      |
|-----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| France                      | Paper and web: 222<br>Audiovisual: 161<br>Digital social networks: 39<br><b>Total : 422</b> |
| French-speaking Switzerland | Paper and web: 205<br>Audiovisual: 71<br>Digital social networks: 39<br><b>Total : 315</b>  |
| Quebec                      | Paper and web: 58<br>Audiovisual: 14<br>Digital social networks: 26<br><b>Total : 98</b>    |
| French-speaking Belgium     | Paper and web: 71<br>Audiovisual: 10<br>Digital social networks: 28<br><b>Total : 109</b>   |

### Authors' Note

As mentioned above, this article is based on doctoral research conducted in French. The main aim was to introduce the English-speaking world to the notion of public critique as a tool for understanding the relationship between journalists and politicians, as well as democratic dynamics.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Cédric Tant  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0402-896X>

## Notes

1. A table at the end of this article shows the breakdown of productions by territory. For access to all productions, see Tant (2023). For an in-depth look at the dimensions and applications of public critique, see Tant (2024).
2. All excerpts from the corpus have been translated from French by the author.
3. Translation by the author.
4. Translation by the author.
5. Translation by the author.
6. Translation by the author.
7. Translation by the author.
8. Translation by the author.
9. It is essential to note that this division between what is institutional and what is not is probably not so obvious. Especially as the development of movements encouraging the development of a parallel public sphere will tend more to blur such a distinction.

## References

- Ahva, L., and V. Wiard. 2018. "Participation in Local Journalism. Assessing Two Approaches through Access, Dialogue and Deliberation." *Sur le journalisme* 7(2):64–76. doi:10.25200/SLJ.v7.n2.2018.359.
- Amossy, R. 2022. Construire la légitimité et l'autorité politiques en discours. *Argumentation et analyse du discours* (28):1–19. doi:10.4000/aad.5984.
- Angenot, M. 2013. *Rhétorique de la confiance et de l'autorité*. Montréal: Presses universitaires McGill-Queen's.
- Arfi, F., M. Hajdenberg, A. Rouget, and M. Turchi. 2019 (September 3th). Affaire Rugby: Un été d'intox. *Mediapart*.
- Armanios, R. 2018 (September 6th). Confiance entamée. *Le Courrier*. <https://lecourrier.ch/2018/09/06/confiance-entamee/>
- Bastin, G. 2002. Les journalistes accrédités auprès des institutions européennes à Bruxelles. Quelques signes du changement d'un monde. . . In *Les métiers de l'Europe politique. Acteurs et professionnalisations de l'Union européenne*, ed. D. Georgakakis. Strasbourg: Presses universitaires de Strasbourg.
- Blommaert, J. 2005. *Discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bolz, L., J. Charbonneaux, and V. Jeanne-Perrier. 2017. "L'interview politique : Une négociation d'autorité ? Frontières et imaginaires d'une pratique journalistique." In *La fabrique de l'autorité. Figures des décideurs en régime médiatique*, eds. A. Wrona and É. Seignobos. Paris: Les Petits matins.
- Bourdieu, P. 1997. *Sur la télévision*. Paris: Liber éditions.
- Bourricaud, F. 1961. *Esquisse d'une théorie de l'autorité*. Paris: Plon.

- Budry, É. 2018 (August 31th). *Le président du PLR ne veut pas de «tribunal médiatique»*. La Tribune de Genève. <https://www.tdg.ch/le-president-du-plr-neveut-pas-de-tribunal-media-tique-410503081774>.
- Carlson, M. 2015. Metajournalistic Discourse and the Meanings of Journalism: Definitional Control, Boundary Work, and Legitimation. *Communication Theory* 26(4):349–68. doi:10.1111/comt.12088.
- Carpentier, N. 2011. *Media and Participation: A Site of Ideological-democratic Struggle*. Chicago: Intellect.
- Cayrol, R. 1997. *Médias et démocratie. La dérive*. Paris: Presses de Sciences Po.
- Champagne, P. 1995. La double dépendance. Quelques remarques sur les rapports entre les champs politique, économique et journalistique. *Hermès* (17–18):215. doi:10.4267/2042/15218.
- Charaudeau, P. 1994. Le contrat de communication de l'information médiatique. *Le Français dans le monde*, (Numéro spécial).
- Charaudeau, P. 2005. *Le discours politique. Les masques du pouvoir*. Paris: Vuibert.
- Charron, J. 1994. *La production de l'actualité : Une analyse stratégique des relations entre la presse parlementaire et les autorités politiques*. Montréal: Boréal.
- Cornu, D. 1997. *Éthique de l'information*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Côté, G. 2022, (August 9th). “Chutes-de-la-Chaudière : Un ex-conseiller municipal de Lévis se lance avec Duhaime.” *Le Journal de Montréal*, 7.
- Curran, J. 1991. “Mass Media and Democracy.” In *Mass Media and Society*, eds. J. Curran and M. Gurevitch. Londres: Edward Arnold.
- Curran, J. 2011. *Media and Democracy*. Abigdon: Routledge.
- Dakhli, J. 2017. Comptes personnels et enjeux publics : La communication de responsables politiques sur Twitter. In *Discours des réseaux sociaux : Enjeux publics, politiques et médiatiques*, eds. M. Burger, J. Thornborrow, and R. Fitzgerald. Louvain-la-Neuve: De Boeck Supérieur.
- Derfel, A., @Aaron\_Derfel. (2020, juin 6). *Just discovered Premier@francoislegault has blocked me on Twitter. Was it after I wrote my latest story on the lack (. . .)*. Twitter. [https://twitter.com/Aaron\\_Derfel/status/1269288934644813825?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1269288934644813825%7Ctwgr%5E3a160b9d8f0f3922525eb6d770c3bb52c401c7d1%7Ctwcon%5Es1\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A77A%2F%2Fwww.journaldequebec.com%2F2020%2F06%2F06%2Ftwitter-unjournaliste-dit-avoir-ete-bloque-par-legault](https://twitter.com/Aaron_Derfel/status/1269288934644813825?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1269288934644813825%7Ctwgr%5E3a160b9d8f0f3922525eb6d770c3bb52c401c7d1%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A77A%2F%2Fwww.journaldequebec.com%2F2020%2F06%2F06%2Ftwitter-unjournaliste-dit-avoir-ete-bloque-par-legault)
- Derville, G. 2017. *Le pouvoir des médias*. Grenoble: Presses universitaires de Grenoble.
- Dogan, M. 2005. *Political Mistrust and the Discrediting of Politicians*. Leyde: Brill.
- Douglas, M. 1999. *Comment pensent les institutions?*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Dufresne, M. 2017. “L’initiative citoyenne européenne révèle l’impasse communicationnelle entre les citoyens et les institutions.” *Hermès* 77(1):63–70. doi:10.3917/herm.077.0063.
- Esquenazi, J.-P. 1999. *Télévision et démocratie : La politique à la télévision française 1958–1990*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).
- France 2. 2019, (July 23th). François de Rugy sur le plateau du 20 Heures: « Je me présente devant vous, ce soir, en homme blanchi ». [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/la-republique-en-marche/francois-derugy/francois-de-rugy-sur-le-plateau-du-20-heures-je-me-presente-devant-vous-cesoir-en-homme-blanchi\\_3548409.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/la-republique-en-marche/francois-derugy/francois-de-rugy-sur-le-plateau-du-20-heures-je-me-presente-devant-vous-cesoir-en-homme-blanchi_3548409.html)
- Granjon, F. 2021. “Gilets jaunes et colères noires. Violence, médias et émotions.” *Questions de communication* (40):303–18. doi:10.4000/questionsdecommunication.27090.

- Grevisse, B. 2016. *Déontologie du journalisme : Enjeux éthiques et identités professionnelles*. Brussels: De Boeck.
- Herman, E., and N. Chomsky. 2002. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. New York: Pantheon.
- Hubé, N. 2022. *La politique des chemins courts. Un siècle de relations entre journalistes et communicants gouvernementaux en Allemagne (1918–2018)*. Vulaines-sur-Seine: Éditions du croquant.
- Johannès, F. 2022 (January 10th). Eric Zemmour critique les journalistes, professionnels « les plus détestés de France ». *Le Monde*. [https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2022/01/10/presidentielle-2022-eric482zemmour-critique-les-journalistes-professionnels-les-plus-detestes-defrance\\_6108932\\_823448.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2022/01/10/presidentielle-2022-eric482zemmour-critique-les-journalistes-professionnels-les-plus-detestes-defrance_6108932_823448.html)
- Kerbrat-Orecchioni, C. 1980. *Le Discours polémique*. Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon.
- Krieg-Planque, A. 2013. *Analyser les discours institutionnels*. Paris: Armand Colin.
- Laclau, E., and C. Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.
- Langer, A. I., and J. B. Gruber. 2021. “Political Agenda Setting in the Hybrid Media System: Why Legacy Media Still Matter a Great Deal.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 26(2):313–40. doi:10.1177/1940161220925023.
- Le Bohec, J. 2000. “La question du « rôle démocratique » de la presse locale en France.” *Hermès* 26–27. doi:10.4267/2042/14774.
- Legavre, J.-B. 1992. “Off the record. Mode d’emploi d’un instrument de coordination.” *Politix* 5(9):135–58. doi:10.3406/polix.1992.1533.
- Legavre, J.-B. 2011. “Entre conflit et coopération. Les journalistes et les communicants comme « associés-rivaux ».” *Communication and Langages* 2011(169):105–23. doi:10.4074/S0336150011003097.
- Léman bleu. 2018 (August 27th). L’entretien avec Pierre Maudet. *Consulté à l’adresse*. <https://www.lemanbleu.ch/fr/Emissions/68765-L-entretien-avec-Pierre-Maudet.html>
- Lemieux, C. 1999. “Une critique sans raison. L’approche bourdieusienne des médias et ses limites.” In *Le travail sociologique de Pierre Bourdieu. Dettes et critiques*, ed. B. Lahire. Paris: La Découverte.
- LN24. 2022 (April 26th). Le cordon sanitaire a-t-il fait son temps ? *Pour info*. <https://www.ln24.be/2022-04-26/pour-info-le-cordon-sanitaire-t-il-fait-sontemps>
- Matheson, D. 2004. Weblogs and the Epistemology of the News: Some Trends in Online Journalism. *New Media and Society* 6(4):443–68. doi:10.1177/146144804044329.
- Mauss, M. 1969. *Œuvres. Tome 3. Cohésion sociale et divisions de la sociologie*. Paris: Minuit.
- McQuail, D. 2006. “Media Roles in Society.” In *Researching Media, Democracy and Participation: The Intellectual Work of the 2006 European Media and Communication Doctoral Summer School*, eds. N. Carpentier, P. Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, K. Nordenstreng, M. Hartmann, P. Vihalemm, and B. Cammaerts. Tartu: Tartu University Press.
- Mercier, A. 2015. “Twitter, espace politique, espace polémique. L’exemple des tweet-campagnes municipales en France (janvier-mars 2014).” *Les Cahiers du numérique* 11(4):145–68.
- Monte, M., and C. Oger. 2015. La construction de l’autorité en contexte. L’effacement du dissensus dans les discours institutionnels. *Mots* (107):5–18. doi:10.4000/mots.21847.
- Ogbebor, B. 2020. *British Media Coverage of the Press Reform Debate. Journalists Reporting Journalism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Oger, C. 2021. *Faire référence. La construction de l’autorité dans le discours des institutions*. Paris: EHESS.

- Papadopoulos, Y. 2013. *Democracy in Crisis? Politics, Governance and Policy*. London: Macmillan Education.
- Perloff, R. 2017. *The Dynamics of Political Communication: Media and Politics in a digital Age*. Abigdon: Routledge.
- Rieffel, R. 2001. "Vers un journalisme mobile et polyvalent?" *Quaderni* 45(1):153–69. doi:10.3406/quad.2001.1502.
- Roginsky, S. 2021. "La fabrique du capital médiatique au Parlement européen à l'aune des réseaux socionumériques : Entre permanence et reconfiguration des activités de médiatisation des députés européens." In *Un capital médiatique ? Usages et légitimation de la médiatisation en politique*, eds. C. Desrumaux and J. Nollet. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Rosanvallon, P. 2008. *La légitimité démocratique. Impartialité, réflexivité, proximité*. Paris: Le Seuil.
- RTS. (2018j, septembre 13). Antonio Hodgers « Avec la présomption d'innocence, nous n'avons pas voulu agir à chaud et il n'y avait pas d'urgence. » Téléjournal de 19h30. <https://www.rts.ch/play/tv/19h30/video/antonio-hodgers-avecla-presomption-dinnocence-nous-navons-pas-voulu-agir-a-chaud-et-il-ny-avait-pasdurgence-?urn=urn:rts:video:9841835>
- Saitta, E. 2008. "Les journalistes politiques et leurs sources. D'une rhétorique de l'expertise critique à une rhétorique du « cynisme »." *Mots* (87):113–28. doi:10.4000/mots.12722.
- Sigal, L. 1973. *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking*. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company.
- Small, T. 2010. "La politique canadienne en 140 caractères : La vie des partis dans l'univers Twitter." *Revue parlementaire canadienne*, 41–8.
- Tant, C. 2024. *La critique publique. Une pratique de légitimation démocratique des journalistes et des politiques*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Tant, C. 2023. "La critique publique que s'adressent les journalistes et les politiques lors de polémiques. Dimensions métadiscursives et articulations de la démocratie en France, en Suisse francophone, au Québec et en Belgique francophone." Doctoral thesis, UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles, Brussels.
- Tant, C. 2021. "Le Média—A Populist Critique of Journalists and the Media by Journalists: Journalism as a Social Good of the People. *Brazilian Journalism Research* 17(3):628–51. doi:10.25200/BJR.v17n3.2021.1431.
- Thorbjørnsrud, K., and T. Ustad Figenschou. 2022. "The Alarmed Citizen: Fear, Mistrust, and Alternative Media." *Journalism Practice* 16(5):1018–35. doi:10.1080/17512786.2020.1825113.
- Touboul, A. 2010. "Journalistes et publics, l'annonce d'un mariage de raison." *Communication and langages* 2010(165):19–30. doi:10.4074/S0336150010013037.
- Touraine, A. 1989. "Communication politique et crise de la représentativité." *Hermès* 4(4): 43–51. doi:10.4267/2042/15354.
- van Leeuwen, T. 2016. "Legitimation in Discourse and Communication." *Discourse and Communication* 1(1):91–112. doi:10.1177/1750481307071986.
- Wiard, V. 2022. *Quelles nouvelles de Bruxelles ? Analyse des dynamiques collectives d'un écosystème médiatique local*. PhD thesis, David Domingo and Ike Picone. Université libre de Bruxelles and Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Bruxelles. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361763558\\_Quelles\\_nouvelles\\_de\\_Bruxelles\\_Analyse\\_des\\_dynamiques\\_collectives\\_d'un\\_ecosysteme\\_mediatique\\_local](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/361763558_Quelles_nouvelles_de_Bruxelles_Analyse_des_dynamiques_collectives_d'un_ecosysteme_mediatique_local)

- Wolton, D. 1991. "Les journalistes entre l'opinion publique et les hommes politiques." In *Histoire et Médias. Journalisme et journalistes français (1950–1995)*, ed. M. Martin. Paris: Albin Michel.
- Zienkowski, J. 2018. "Challenging Nationalist Definitions of Racism." *Zeitschrift für Diskursforschung/Journal for Discourse Studies* 1:51–72.
- Zuckerman, E. 2021. *Mistrust: Why Losing Faith In Institutions Provides The Tools To Transform Them*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.

### Author Biography

**Cédric Tant** is assistant professor in communication studies at Université libre de Bruxelles (Belgium). His research focuses on public critique by journalists and politicians as meta-discourses that articulate democracy. He thus examines the new dynamics of democracy in the digital age and in a context of mistrust of institutions.