

Role of Media in Politics: An Overview

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Abstract:

One of the conditions for good governance in a modern democracy is a free and impartial medium. It is one of the main means of political communication. There are two views on the role of the media. On the one hand media serves as the 'fourth estate' of democratic system because it is the main source of information which helps the citizens to form public opinions, learns about the working plans and programs that the government is undertaking, their successful implementation or failure. It is also being recognized as 'watchdog' of democracy because it keeps the government active on public matter. On the other hand, it is alleged that the media propagates on behalf of some influential or rich classes. Different information served from different mediums can confuse public opinion. Many times, the presentation of information is made more interesting than serious business. In these cases, the question arises about the neutrality or impartiality of the functions of the media or how effective are they in performing their function is a matter of study. This paper aims to analyze this to separate aspects on media performance.

Key Words: media, politics, democracy, fourth estate, watchdog.

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Introduction:

The media plays the key role of the political communication process in any political system. Media refers to various means of communication that help in communicating to a large number of people at the same time. Among the different types of media, only the role of mainstream media e.g., the newspaper or the press, the Radio, and the television will be mentioned here. The main function of the media is to inform the people about the current social, political and economic issues and to form and express strong conscious public opinion. Because one of the main conditions for the success of democracy is the strong awakening, public opinion. According to MacIver, 'This incessant activity of popular opinion is the dynamic of democracy'. (MacIver, 1960)¹. With the advancement of technology, the role and importance of mass media in shaping people's attitudes, thoughts are increasing. What role the media will play in a country depends on i) the nature of the state system, ii) how much people enjoy freedom in that state, and iii) how the ruling class uses the media to build public consent or legitimacy. Reviewing the role of media of different countries, it is seen that in some countries it plays an important role in strengthening the prevailing values and in other countries in opposing them. It is also seen that in some countries the government is encouraging the media and some where it is controlling. The control and effect of mass media are most important consideration in all political system. Socialist and autocratic regimes are particularly concerned with government control of the mass media. (Ball,1988)². For example, in a socialist and autocratic system, the government controls the media. Also, in our country radio and television were operated under the supervision of state committee. In the liberal democratic system, the exception to this is seen, but the media is dominated by the rich or influential classes. Restriction of mass media competition in liberal democratic system and the degree of government control may be more subtle. The trivialization of political news, the manner in which information is presented and what is omitted may be politically significant.....' (Ball,1988)³. Before making a decision in this case, it is necessary to see how much the owner has interfered in the editing or whether there is any political bias.

Media as a Means for the Formation of Public Opinion:

As an instrument for the formation of public opinion, the press or the newspaper publishes the complaints of the people and the details of various problems of the society. Newspapers interpret news, provide information on peoples hopes, aspiration and grievances, describe and critique government policies, analyze political event into a particular view point. Articles and editorial comments of the newspaper have a profound effect on the people and greatly influence their views. The government has to be restrained and cautions for fear of adverse criticism from the press.

But there is some significant criticism against the newspaper. Every newspaper creates its own devotees who worship on the supposed belief that it delivers the good for them. Moreover, the manifestation of an ‘Uneasy relation between big business and democracy’ through the press possess a serious threat to democracy itself. (Corry)⁴. As Finer points out, “The amount of objectively true information and balanced opinion is on the whole, small, and the press has acquired and extraordinary dominance over opinion aggravating rather than correcting its defects’ (Finer)⁵. As the impact of the newspaper on the people is deep and wide, it should provide truthful and accurate news in an impartial manner. Prof. Laski said of the need for honest and unbiased news coverage to preserve political freedom. (Laski)⁶. Corry also said to give a government agency power to sensor fact and opinion would draw all the power-hungry element in the community into a struggle to get control of the government. Democracy needs a free press, but it cannot be found through governmental regulation of the press. (Corry)⁷.

Radio and television are also one of the most powerful means of influencing public opinion. They affect everyone, educated and uneducated. People in remote rural areas also get various news of the country through them. Radio and television help to form public opinion through its news coverage, review and survey. But in many cases the government has control over radio and television. As a result, there is no antigovernment discussion.

Media & Politics: Theoretical Perspective:

Although there is a close relationship between politics and the media, it can never be explained simply or unilaterally. Reviewing the theoretical context, it is seen that liberal theorists say that media and democracy are complementary to each other. Here the media is

an independent agency. According to liberal thinkers' media are recognized as the fourth pillar of democracy. On the one hand media provides information to the people on various issues, it also protects the people from abuse of power by criticizing government work. In this way the media plays the role of watchdog. The names of Thomas Carlyle and Edmund Barke are notable as example here.

On the other hand, Marxist theorists see the media as a part of a superstructure closely linked to the economic base the independent positions of the media are denied here. Marxist theorists Ralph Miliband said the editors and the journalists in newspaper and other media organization depend on the owners for their jobs and therefore will not use any apparent autonomy they may have to resist the dissemination of bourgeois' ideology. (Miliband, 1975)⁸. Another Marxists theorist Althusser considers the media to be part of the ideological state apparatus (Althusser, 1971)⁹. Above all Gramsci sees the media as means of establishing the dominance or hegemony of the rulers by gaining the consent of the ruled. They argue that in this way bourgeois develops a kind of 'false class consciousness'. However, the idea of media ownership and control of traditional Marxism was criticized by pluralist theorists. They believe that there is no regulatory ruling class here. The government act as the main regulator of media ownership and contents. They also focus on commercial needs and sales rather than ideological state apparatus. The name of pluralist thinker James Whale is particularly significant in this case.

Media and Politics: Critical Appraisal

Professor Ball said about the limitation of the media, "it may be that readers and viewers are only willing to expose themselves to political views that they already agree with and perhaps the relative apathy, not to be confused with ignorance of the population may be an excellent means of defence against the on slot of mass media (Ball,1988)¹⁰.

Modern democracy is an indirect or representative democracy. In such a democracy sovereignty of the people becomes a reality through election. But in the big countries, as the direct role of the people diminishing, reluctant of the political parties, political organizations the influence of the media as a mediator is increasing. The role of the media is undeniable in making the rulers and policy makers aware of their responsibilities during elections, sensitizing them on the demand of the electorate and making the electorate aware of various political issues. Therefore, media sets its agenda to make the people aware of the important

political issues. It decides which issues will be important in the next elections. On the other hand, politicians also take part in this game. In this way communication is established between the media, people and politicians.

The government use the media to establish the legitimacy of the existing political system. Various strategies are used to build the consent of the people. One of them is political advertisement. In this case the qualities of a political party or leadership are unilaterally expressed. Also, the demand of the people is given priority by making the advertisement attractive through languages, symbols and images. The purpose of such advertisement to make profit, to entertain the listener, viewer or reader and to collect revenues.

There is a lot of debate about what role the media plays in electorate politics or how much it will affect the electoral behaviors of the people. In general, it can be said that news is a marketable product of media, so the possibility of one-sided information remains. However, the media highlights any recent political, social, event that could have an impact on electoral politics.

Another important role of the news media is in the field of election surveys. The purpose of media polling during the election campaign is to draw the attention of the voters to the candidates and to introduce the issues, which is good for democracy or exception may occur. The role of the media is also increasing in the case of exit polls. However, the question remains about its accuracy, especially in a large country like India. Following professor Ball, we can say that “ the movement is not only one way: ideas, demands, opinions, are being communicated from below as well (Ball,1988)¹¹. People express their views on various political issues. Therefore, the role of media in public opinion polls is increasing which influences government policy making and decision-making process.

Conclusion:

Based on the above discussion it can be said that media plays two types of role in the process of political communication. As recognized as the independent position of the media, the role of the media as a tool for building the legitimacy of politicians or rulers is undeniable. Although the extent of the media’s influence on political views and preferences is not accurately measurable, it is not possible to separate it from political life, rather it is growing. It is also true that in the age of electronic media, publicity of the news and

advertisement is very expensive. As a result, impartial and independent news coverage became a farce. The media has an appeal to the viewers. Moreover, in a competitive political system, the media has to serve information consciously. So even though government control is tight, competition in the media continues. Leaders of political parties also often do not use the media properly. American political scientist Richard Rose rightly says, “politicians may be his own worst enemy in this field” (Ball,1988)¹². In order to play the role of the fourth pillar of the democratic system, the media has to serve news objectively to the readers, listeners and viewers, remember what is the greater political and social responsibility of them. On the other hand, media has to be use for constructive purposes by eliminating excessive negative attitude towards media.

References:

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