

Role of the media

Lecture Summerschool EDELNet

Malaga July 2017

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Malaga, 12 July 2017

Task of media in a democracy

Democracy means that the people vote politicians into power and hold them accountable, also through voting. In order to do this well, the people need to know who these politicians are, they need to know what they do (and what they do not do) and why, and they need to form an opinion about politics and the politicians. The mass media perform an essential role in this process, because of the large scale of our democracies.

So, firstly, media need to have access to all politically relevant information, and they need freedom and protection to be able to report about this information. This information needs to be as objective and true as possible.

Secondly, media exercise public control of the government by exposing the actions, mistakes and defaults of politicians. The media therefor must be able to question, investigate and criticize them.

Thirdly, the mass media are essential for the shaping of the political opinions of the people. The media must offer space for debate and therefore be pluralistic (represent all views) and unbiased (not favoring one view over another). In summary we can say that the media have three important functions in a democracy: informing, checking and debating.

Human rights

Since the end of WW II, freedom of expression and freedom to receive information are considered to be essential for the functioning of democracies and are therefore considered fundamental human rights, enshrined in international law as well as in national constitutions.

For example:

- Article 19 Universal Declaration of Human Rights
- Article 19 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- Article 10 European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms

These are traditional freedom rights, but they might give rise to duties to the state to take action in order to protect, provide or maintain these freedoms, in order to ensure that everybody can fully enjoy these rights. Also the inherent vagueness of human rights require the state to at least specify these rights in more detail in national law, even though the freedom of expression is subject to limitations, exceptions and conflict with other rights.

Regulating media

Within democracies, there is much debate about how well the mass media actually perform their public democratic task. Channeling political information and debates is clearly not the only thing mass media do. Entertainment and covering other social domains like sports or culture are usually more important. In this perspective, political news is just one of the genres that the media offer.

Governments have long since realized this and therefore devised policies to ensure that mass media do perform their public democratic task well. Broadly speaking, there are two models for these policies: the public model and the private model.

In the **public model**, the government sets up clear rules for the media concerning the representation of politics, in order to guarantee fair and balanced coverage of political facts and views. Television typically remains under state control, under stricter rules than the press.

In the **private model** there exist far less state control over the media and the required plurality of political views is left to the forces of the free market.

The public model, as you might have guessed, used to be the dominant European model, whereas the private model was the American one.

Starting in the 1980's however, in line with the rise of neo-liberalism, **deregulation and privatization** transformed most of the European models into mixed or private models, as well as reducing the existing regulations in the USA even further.

Challenges to the democratic task of the media

Privatization and deregulation in general have increased the **plurality** of media, however they also have strongly reduced the attention of the mass media for public and political affairs and even for hard news (facts) in general. As a result, in countries where the private model is dominant, the people have become more ignorant of politics. In many countries, the media have also become more cynical about politics, thereby potentially even undermining the democratic process.

The rise of television as the dominant form of mass media is another important development. It has had a big influence on the representation of politics and therefore also on politics themselves. Television, more than the printed press, tends to focus on

people, emotions and stories, rather than on policies in general. Politics follow this change in favor of a strong focus on the personal stories of the political leaders, thereby changing the dynamics of democracy, as professor Spoormans discussed on Monday.

There are other worries about how media function fail to fully fulfill their public democratic duty. These worries concern the fairness and truthfulness if the representation of politics in the media. I will mention a few of these worries.

- **Bias.** Bias is the tendency to give preference to one view at the detriment of other views or of the truth. Media are often, and not without reason, accused of being biased. What this bias is however, seems a matter of opinion. For the left, the bias is in favor of capitalist, imperialist or conservative views and interests. For the right, the media are biased in favor of the liberal leftwing elite.
- **Framing.** Framing is the tendency to represent a selection of facts in a consistent story, thus persuading people to accept a specific version of the facts. For example: policies or general developments get turned into stories about personal struggle.
- **Agenda setting.** This is the power to determine the topics of the public and political debate.
- **Controlling access.** This means the power to determine who participates in the public debate and which interests and views are acknowledged, and who is marginalized, delegitimized or ignored.

These worries are not unwarranted, but we must realize that in our modern democracies the representation of politics and the shaping of political views there exists a complex interaction between politicians, the media and the people, since they all depend on each other.

The public sphere

The German philosopher Habermass explained how the rise of the press and mass media created a so called '**public sphere**' from the 18th century onward. This public sphere exists somewhere between the private sphere and the political sphere. Through the media, joint opinions could be formulated and shared, with the claim of legitimacy because they were supposedly held by the people. These are what we call 'public opinions'. Our democracies as I described them at the beginning need the mass media for this reason.

The existence of a public sphere however is not a given and unchangeable fact.

Habermass was concerned that the commercial nature of the mass media would destroy this public sphere and that it would be replaced by a '**consumer sphere**' as he described it, an extension of the private sphere.

The American philosopher Fukuyama, to quote another philosopher, famously predicted almost 30 years ago that with the collapse of the communist world and the ultimate victory of liberalism, politics as an ideological struggle as we knew them, would come to an end. Politics as an ideological struggle would be replaced by 'economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands'. Live in this unhistorical world would be sad and boring. And with the demise of politics, also the public sphere would disappear. Fukuyama has been much criticized and often misunderstood, but his prediction about the neo-liberal consensus that was to appear all over the West was in several accounts quite accurate.

This brings us back to the question 'how bad is it'?

Non-democracies – negative media power

In order to understand how media actually support or weaken democracies, it might be good to have a look at how media work in non-democratic societies.

Back in the good old days of the Cold War, the world was simple. There were the good guys and the bad guys. Among the good guys, us in the West, the media performed their public democratic task as described and in that way supported democracy. Among the bad guys however, the communists, media performed a completely different role. There the media brainwashed the people into uncritical and blindly loyal followers of a criminal regime. So we have a rather **schizophrenic perception** of the powers of the media: both very positive and very negative.

These fears of the negative power of the media have important roots in the interbellum. At that time, the rise of **radio** as the new mass medium coincided with the rise of **totalitarian regimes** throughout Europe who heavily relied on the use of this new medium. The dominant psychological theory at that time was a behavioristic one, with a rather **simple stimulus-response relation**: if you give the right stimulus, the corresponding response is inevitable. Think of the dog of Pavlov. So if you give people the right stimulus (propaganda), the desired response (loyal believers) will occur. These fears were famously expressed in novels like '1984' and 'A Brave New World'.

Non-democracies – Spain and GDR

But what do we know about the effects of media in non-democratic states? Did they succeed in turning the people into loyal followers of the regime?

If we look at several European countries with a non-democratic regime who in the late 20th century changed to democracies, like **Spain** and **Eastern Germany**, the experience shows that the effects of the mass media on the political views of the people were very mixed, to say the least.

In these non-democracies, the media obviously did not have the mentioned public democratic political task. Mass media were **strictly controlled** by the government, in order to make sure that only the right information was spread and that no unwanted facts or political views were presented to the people. Also here, the control over television was more strict than the control over the printed press.

This strong control over the media however did not by itself succeed in turning the majority of the population into loyal followers of the regime. It did however manage to suppress political discussions for quite some time.

Both in Spain and the GDR, the non-democratic regimes eventually came peacefully to an end, mostly through developments inside these countries. Several factors contributed to a decreasing level of support for the regime, like the rising level of **education**, the high level of exposure to **media and views from outside** the country and the existence of relatively **independent groups** and subcultures within the society. In the face of this, the strictly controlled media did no longer succeed in supporting the regime. On the contrary, the clear untruthfulness of the information spread by the media actually eroded the legitimacy of the regimes.

So, in Spain under Franco as well as in the GDR, notwithstanding the near absence of support by any mass media, democratic forces grew and became so strong that the change to democracy became inevitable.

You might think 'well, those were rather mild dictatorships, what about the real bad ones?' And you are right. In any society, the public sphere disappears when the control and suppression by the regime become too strong. Under truly **brutal dictatorships**, like Iraq under Saddam Hussein or the Soviet Union under Stalin, the flow of believable information, the exchange of views or the shaping of political views all become impossible, because not only the media cannot be trusted, but neither can your colleagues, your neighbors or your family. This still does not mean that people turn into loyal supporters of the regime, but merely that they abandon politics and withdraw into their private spheres. For the regimes this is good enough, for the time being. The 'Arab spring' of 2011 was a nasty surprise for many of them.

Power of the media in democracies

The findings in non-democracies seem to suggest that people are much more stubborn and resilient towards indoctrination by politicians and the media than we often might think. Logically, this conclusion also applies to democracies.

Adding to this, studies done after WW II showed that the presumed behavioristic stimulus-response relationship that underpinned the fear for the negative power of the new mass media actually did not apply to the media. Propaganda usually doesn't change people's views. On the contrary, it rather seemed to enforce those views. Media attention mainly **mobilizes existing support**.

Other research suggests that people do not only rely on what they read and hear from the media to shape their political views, but instead they base those views to a large extent on more **fundamental factors**, like substantial social developments, the economy or more permanent group loyalties.

We have seen that the loss of the traditional group loyalties that underpinned the old democratic model with stable mass parties has led to a much more **volatile electorate**, as professor Spoomans explained to us. The rise of television has transformed the way politics are represented. Higher education levels have made people more self-conscious and more able to form their own opinion. People who have clear political views do not easily change them. Yet other research suggest that precisely those with a moderate level of education and not so clear political opinions, are actually more persuaded by the media, and mostly by television.

Examples

Let's have a look at two cases as examples of the interaction between media, politics and the people.

- Berlusconi 1994. if control of television wins elections, it seems to swing votes, but people also walk away from media they don't agree with
- The Sun. 1997 elections: tabloids don't decide elections, but follow voters. 2017 elections: if they don't people don't show up

Berlusconi

In 1994 the Italian entrepreneur Silvio Berlusconi was elected prime minister of Italy, and he remained to dominate Italian politics for two decades. Berlusconi owned several TV stations and in the beginning of the 21st century, after becoming prime minister for the second time, he appointed a new director for the main public TV station, RAI 1, and from then on he controlled 5 of the 6 main TV stations, for a period of several years.

Did this mean that Berlusconi could dictate how people voted? Was his control of the media the reason for his political success? There are reasons to believe there was an influence and it might even have decided the election. At the same time that influence was probably moderate.

For one, Berlusconi's success not only depended on his control of the media. He had a perfect timing and came to power after the collapse of the post war political order in Italy in the early 90's. Secondly, he had great communicational skills. But most interesting for us is, that the fact that the TV stations became almost all supportive of Berlusconi, resulted in people shifting their preferences for the TV stations. Those who did not like Berlusconi, swapped from RAI 1 to RAI 3 for example.

The Sun and the elections in the UK

In the UK 1992 general election the Conservative leader John Major won. The popular tabloid The Sun supported him, as it usually supported the conservatives. In the

general elections of 1997 though, The Sun changed sides and supported Tony Blair, the Labour candidate. Blair won with a landslide.

Did The Sun help him to win? Research showed something else: The Sun followed the mood of the country and changed to the winning side. Or, as one journalist stated it: "Although the Sun newspaper is a great weather vane, it doesn't decide the direction of the wind" <Weather vane: windvaan, veleta, Wetterfahne>

If we look at the latest election in the UK, in 2017, we see that the Sun strongly supported the Conservatives. Of the readers of The Sun that went to vote, indeed 60% voted Conservative, but only 50% went to vote, which was the lowest turnout when compared to the readers of other newspapers. So in this case, The Sun understood the current prevalence of its readers well, but failed to mobilize them.

Ideological perspectives

Does this mean that the media don't have any power over the political views of the people at all? The answer actually partly depends on your ideological position.

How you value the different factors of the complicated relationship between media and democracy depends to a large extent on your view of the basic power dynamics in society.

For **liberals**, individual freedom is essential. Freedom of the media, often equated with a free market for the media, is seen as the most important condition. If that freedom is assured, media will present a plurality of views and the people will be able to make up their own minds.

From a **Marxist** point of view, the control over the economy is the fundamental force within a society. As long as the media are owned or controlled by capitalist actors, they will continue to serve their interests and not the interest of the people.

For **rightwing populists** or neo conservatives, the media in the West have since long come under the control of leftwing liberal elites who ignore the voices and interests of the people. Only when this control is broken by the forces of the free market, media will fully perform their democratic task.

In summary

- democracy needs the media to fulfill specific tasks, media thus create a public sphere;
- fairness of the political news is influenced and compromised by lots of factors;
- the way this unfairness influences the political views of the people is also dependent on many factors
- whether you consider the media failing in their democratic duty partly depends on your ideological position

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