FRAMING THE DEBATE: INFLUENCES ON MEDIA CONTENT AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

Unfettered access to information; including on politics, terrorism, social problems, corruption, and any other sensitive issues that have a significant influence on people's lives is considered a central pillar of democracy and human development. This study advocates that the press plays a crucial role in the public sphere for example, journalists not only disseminate information. They functions to discover truth (Milton 1904), educate public and enable understanding. Also, they help in maintaining and achieving the balance between stability and change (Emerson 1970: 7), provide different views to make intelligent political choices (Emerson 1962-1963: 881), encourage citizens to participate in the discussion of public issues (Habermas 1989) and therefore ensuring social benefits (Mill 1989: 36).

This study also focuses on a theoretical background that discusses and analyses the forces that shape media content as well as the messages that constitute the symbolic environment outside the media organisations. Nerone (1995) argues, "A truly free press would be free not just of state intervention but also of market forces and ownership ties and a host of other material bonds" (p.22). Media theorists argue that journalists "have to make decisions at the centre of a field of different constraints, demands or attempted uses of power or influence" (McQuail 2000: 249). To understand what affects media representation, this paper is going to give an in-depth explanation about the role of state, government, media owners and economic in controlling media content.

Keywords: democracy, representation, ideology, public sphere

1. INTRODUCTION

Unfettered access to information; including on politics, terrorism, social problems, corruption, and any other sensitive issues that have a significant influence on people's lives is considered a central pillar of democracy and human development.

Thus, in order to ensure a sustainable human development and deliberative democracy, this study advocates that the press plays a crucial role in the public sphere for example, journalists not only disseminate information. They functions to discover truth (Milton 1904), educate public and enable

understanding. Also, they help in maintaining and achieving the balance between stability and change (Emerson 1970: 7), provide different views to make intelligent political choices (Emerson 1962, 1963: 881), encourage citizens to participate in the discussion of public issues (Habermas 1989) and therefore ensuring social benefits (Mill 1989: 36).

This chapter also provides a theoretical background that discusses and analyses the forces that shape media content as well as the messages that constitute the symbolic environment outside the media organisations. Nerone (1995) argues, "A truly free press would be free not just of state intervention but also of market forces and ownership ties and a host of other material bonds" (22). Media theorists argue that journalists "have to make decisions at the centre of a field of different constraints, demands or attempted uses of power or influence" (McQuail 2000: 249).

However, due to the increase forces over media content, the role of the press in shaping public sphere becomes an issue. Hence, this chapter aims to give a brief overview about how the press might hinder or stimulate particular messages to serve hegemonic or ideological group.

2. THE ROLE OF THE PRESS IN PROMOTING DEMOCRATIZATION, GOOD GOVERNANCE AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Unfettered access to information; including on politics, terrorism, social problems, corruption, and any other sensitive issues that have a significant influence on people's lives is considered a central pillar of democracy and human development. To clarify the core concepts, Norris and Odugbemi (2010) argue that *roles* are a set of expectations including values, norms and standards that explain the behaviour of individuals and institutions to fulfil specific obligations in society. In their study *evaluating media performance*, they suggest that journalists perceive themselves as serving multiple roles, for example "in the priority they give to providing background analysis and interpretation of events, to facilitating public debate and expression, and to delivering timely factual coverage of events" (p.14). However, there are ongoing debates about whether journalists should act as neutral observer of events striving for objectivity, fairness and detachment or whether they should adopt certain commitments to promote social change to reflect the interest of a particular group. Norris and Odugbemi (2010) claim that not all journalistic roles have effective contribution for guaranteeing solid democratic governance and human development, for instance, journalists in some countries may serve as lapdogs "acting as loyal spokespersons for state authorities, rarely questioning official information, and providing extensive coverage of ruling elites, dignitaries, and leaders" (p.14). Within this circumstance, news organization may serve as propaganda for autocracies instead of reflecting the masses' voices and concerns. The growing range of threats to media freedom around the globe poses a rigorous challenge to democratic values. As cited in the Leveson report (p. 202): "A free press is the unsleeping guardian of every other right that free men prize; it is the most dangerous foe of tyranny … Under dictatorship the press is bound to languish … But where free institutions are indigenous to the soil and men have the habit of liberty, the press will continue to be the Fourth Estate, the vigilant guardian of the rights of the ordinary citizen". Thus, in order to ensure a sustainable human development and deliberative democracy, Norris and Odugbemi believe that "the news media should be understood to involve, at a minimum, their individual and collective roles as watchdogs, agenda setters, and gatekeepers. Through fulfilling each of these roles, as an institution the news media maximize opportunities for critical reflection and rational deliberation in the public sphere, for inclusive participation in communication processes, and, ultimately, for informed choice and human development in society" (2010: 15).

Following on from Norris and Odugbemi's argument, we can identify three crucial roles of media. As 1) *a watchdog* by checking on political and other holders of powers; not just by being free from any interferences but through its capacity to investigate and acquire information (Curran 2002: 220) which therefore may strength the transparency of governance by highlighting cases of corruption and malfeasance. As cited in the Leveson report (2012) "A free press can communicate important facts that the public have a legitimate interest in knowing (and which others might want to conceal). …one aspect of the public interest in a free press is that it provides an essential set of checks and balances on power (and, more importantly, the abuse of power). …there is a public interest in learning of dangers and risks, even where others may wish to conceal them…. A free press, free of the censorship and restrictions imposed by the powerful, serves the public interest by its investigative and communicative role. Both roles are necessary" (64). 2) As *agenda setters*, the news media have a responsibility to highlight social problems that lead the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. As *gatekeepers,* the news media have responsibility to provide different views to make intelligent political choices (Emerson 1962, 1963: 881) and therefore encourage citizens to participate in the discussion of public issues (Habermas 1989).

Many other roles can be suggested—for example, journalists not only disseminate information. They functions to discover truth (Milton 1904), educate public and enable understanding. Additionally, McQuail (2006) argues that journalists' roles can be categorized into three main sets which are acting as observer; providing an opportunity for diverse voices and playing a participant role in the society. James D. Wolfenson, former President of the World Bank says "A free press is not a luxury. A free press is at the absolute core of equitable development, because if you cannot enfranchise poor people, if they do not have a right to expression, if there is no searchlight on corruption and inequitable practices, you cannot build the public consensus needed to bring about change"(Chuck-A-Sang 2013: 148).

In order to understand the media roles, it is better to look at the relationship between media systems and the socio-cultural and political system in which they embedded because in practise, there are range of barriers that restrict the role of individual journalists and the collective news media as an institution. This mean, in order to understand how the media operate within a particular society, we must discuss and analyse the forces that shape media content as well as the messages that constitute the symbolic environment outside the media organisations.

3. INFLUENCES ON JOURNALISM AND MEDIA CONTENT

Investigative studies about Media Sociology or the influences on news content began to develop after World War II. According to Shoemaker, Pamela J and Reese, Stephen D (1991), early and modern studies on this area started with David Manning White's (1950) ideas. He suggested that journalists act as gatekeepers of media contents. They select from every day events those that will become newsworthy. The study was followed by Warrant Breed's (1955) ideology of how journalists socialize with their career. Since then, a number of studies focused on the ways in which journalists, media workers, ownerships, organization structures and societies as a whole tend to affect media content.

Among the prominent studies that combine different theories of influences on mass media content were done by Gans (1979) and Gitlin (1980). They organized content research into five theoretical perspectives and categories and they argued that: First, media content works as a mirror in reflecting and conveying the social reality to the audience. The mirror approach agrees with the "null effects model" which was developed by Young (1981). Both models predict that media content provides a balance representation of reality with little or no distortion. Young contradicts the "journalist as neutral transmitter" approach and he believes that the fair representation of reality is not because journalists are neutral, observers and recorders who never make a mistake, but they are pushed by counterbalancing forces to produce objective portrayal of events. However, both models were highly criticized because (1) reality is more complex to be described accurately and objectively by any particular source and (2) they both assume mass media have little or no effect on social change. Fishman (1980) says, social reality is the fund of what society knows about itself, and then distortion arises from a conflict between sources of information about some feature of society. Second, content is influenced by the personal, political and professional attitudes of journalists and media workers as a whole. The psychological factors and the amount of training the communicators receive might contribute in producing social reality. Third, Content is influenced by media routines that include identifying what is newsworthy to be considered as news, selecting sources and organizing information according to its importance in the news stories. This means that the organizational routines approach argues that media content is influenced by how journalists and media organization organize works. Fourth, content is influenced by some external factors like social, political, economic and cultural forces. This could be categorized into two major approaches.(1) The market approach, for example, locates great emphasis on advertising and sponsoring products as a source of revenue; (2) the social responsibility approach forces journalists to give audiences what they need rather than what they want. Fifth, content is influenced by the ideology and interest of authority, government and those in power within a particular society, as the hegemony approach suggests.

The hierarchal model, as discussed by Shoemaker, Pamela J and Reese, Stephen D. 1991, is another useful theoretical framework for studying influences on media content, similar in conception to the levels of analysis explained in Gans (1979) and Gitlin (1980), except the mirror approach. It includes five levels of influence, arranged from the micro to macro levels. A micro-level study examines how the journalists' socialization, journalistic routines, and media practices might affect the news selection and gathering; while a macro-level study examines how ownership, ideological forces from the powerful groups and individuals, cultural and political determination affect the news production as a whole. However, influences resulting from media practices may have some minor effects on the entire society, whereas influences resulting from outside the media organization may be somewhat broader. Shoemaker (1987) argues that although these levels function hierarchically, some of these forces that influence media content bring serious ramifications

for social change than others. Constraints from the state, the market, and the profession pose greater challenges on media content, according to (Norris 2010).

3.1 Media Representation and Ideology (Macro-Level Analysis)

Representation is a social process for generating and distributing meaning (Hall 1997). Representation can be of individual (such as the mass media representations of bin Laden as a force for evil), ideas (such as exploitation, poverty, unemployment), experience (such as using particular perfume makes one sexually appealing), events (such as Arab uprising, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001), or social groups (such as feminism, racial groups). Discussion about meaning and media representation already contains 'built-in value judgements' where all representations contain labels and point of view of the people who produce them (Stewart et al. 2001). They argue that "The media do not present reality - they represent it by offering a selection of reality" (p.35). Similarly, Croteau and Hoynes (2013) claim that " mass media texts can be understood in ideological terms, as forms of communication that privilege certain sets of ideas and neglect or undermine others" (p.161). Media critics have looked beyond the internal influences of media to question media representation and to understand the context in which media content are produced and constructed. They have studied the implication of political, economic and cultural influences on media representation.

The relationship between media and meaning making is referred by Carah and Louw (2015) as ' a conspiracy theory' in which power elites control or manipulate media content to serve their own interests. It depicts how ideas are produced and circulated by powerful groups or individuals. "Representations are social productions: their meaning depends on who creates and circulates them, the cultural schema within which that circulation takes place, and who receives them. Representation takes place within the context of power relations. Some people have more power to shape not only particular meanings, but also the contexts within which meanings are produced, distributed and received" (ibid: 7). Ideology, according to Croteau and Hoynes (2013), is understood as "a system of meaning that helps define and explain the world and that makes value judgments about that world" (pp.159-160). The analysis of ideology rooted back to twentieth-century European Marxism. For early Marxists, the discussion of ideology was associated with the concept of 'false consciousness' where the ruling elite enforce their ideas to serve their interests (McCarney 2005). Thus, influences on content from powerful ideologies within a particular society might explain the ways particular event or issues are represented in the media.

The relationship between media and society is mostly characterized by its political and social-cultural dimensions, in which Schudson (1989, 1996) identify as 'the cultural approach'. He pointed out how certain values, traditions and a way of life within a given culture influences the news production. Many studies depended on this approach to analyse journalistic works (see Ettema, Whitney, and Wackman 1997; Zhu et al. 1997). "Journalism is culturally and socially dependent. News must be adapted to cultural forms to be easy to understand, while journalists must operate according to professional norms, in order to make their routines socially acceptable" (Hoyer 2005: 14). A centre of ideological influences is "culture wars", as referred by James Davison Hunter (1991) in contemporary American society. Hunter emphasises on how discussion about particular issues of morality, like sex, abortion, race, etc. is being rejected or fought in the mass media. Media, it is argued, operate to promote cultural conservatives and cultural progressives rather than carrying competing messages.

Furthermore, ideology is associated with political economy influence. Many mass media researchers direct their attention to the empirical analysis of media ownership and control and to the way media market forces operate (see Golding and Murdock 1977; Ferguson 1990). Political-economic theory focuses primarily on the influence of the economic structure on the dynamic of media industries and the ideological content of media. Many scholars claim that media owners have ultimate power over media content to include or exclude what they want; according to Altschul (1984), "the contents of the media always reflect the interests of those who finance them" (McQuail 1994:162). This influence of media ownership can be achieved by setting broad lines of strategy, which are likely to intervene into the journalists' daily practise. The theory addresses how the economic dimension affects journalists work and media routines and how advertisers and political groups regulate media content. Additionally, the implementation of technology in the news organization is considered an intrinsic part of the economic dimension that affects media production (Golding and Elliot 1979; Cottle 1993, 1999; Schudson 1996). "Changes in the technology, both of production and distribution, in the organisation of newsgathering and production, and in the purposes, political or economic, which prompt production in the first place, all shape the form and context of journalistic activities" (Golding and Elliot 1979: 20). Discussion about political economy approach in the capitalist Western countries usually address the influence of economy and political elites, as discussed by Herman and Chomsky (1994). They

argue that the media act as a propaganda tool for political elites or those who hold power. "A propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public"(ibid: 2). The relevance of political economy theory, as mentioned in (McQuail 1994), has been increased by several prominent trends in technology and media business due to convergence, the global growth of media concentration and the decline in the public sector of mass media under the banner of deregulation and privatization, especially in the Western Europe.

Understanding how individual or collective ideologies affect media in particular society requires a clear vision of the idea of democratic governance and the public sphere - the ideal context in which journalists operate - providing the clue to evaluate their representation or performance.

4. PUBLIC SPHERE

For Habermas, the idea of the public sphere is a space where citizens came together to engage in critical public debates, and discuss alternative viewpoints about their common affairs (Habermas 1989c). The public sphere would thus require a medium to be accessed by all citizens in order to facilitate communication and exchange information. Habermas thereby emphasizes that the public sphere should be free and independent from such constrains like economic and political power: "Laws of the market [...] [are] suspended as were laws of the state"(Habermas 1991: 36). The 18th-century Europe witnessed an expansion of the public sphere due to the development of new spaces for social and intellectual interaction, like newspapers, reading clubs, coffeehouses in metropolitan society (Norris 2010). Dahlgren and Sparks argue "in its ambitious guise, however, as it was developed by Habermas, the public sphere should be understood as an analytic category, a conceptual device which, pointing to a specific social phenomenon can also aid us in analysing and researching the phenomenon"(p.2).

Noelle-Neumann has recognized the power of public opinion, mainly after her study about spiral of silence theory, in which the increasing fear of isolation and punishment from elite or hegemonic individuals leads people to conceal their views. She defines public opinion as "attitudes one can express without running the danger of isolating oneself" (Noelle-Neumann 1993: 178). She pointed out to the fact that there are individuals who will never be silenced. "The chance to change or mold public opinion is reserved to those who are not afraid of being isolated. By saying and doing the unpopular, by shocking, they ... can carry their ideas to supremacy" (ibid: 379).

Although Habermas's concept of the public sphere has been widely influential, it has been criticized by many social and political theorists (Dahlgren 1991; Garnham 1990; Fraser 1993). First, Habermas (1997) himself admits that some of his arguments need revision, like his "diagnosis of a unlinear development from a politically active public to one withdrawn into a bad privacy, from a 'culture-debating to a culture-consuming public' is too simplistic" (p.438). Secondly, Fraser (2007) argues that although Habermas pointed to the exclusionary nature of the bourgeois public sphere in terms of class, he neglects the issue of gender and excludes women and other marginalized groups from public sphere (see also Fraser 1991, 1992 & 1993). Thirdly, Habermas remains silent on alternative and oppositional public spheres, Dahlgren argues" For under both the periods of liberal and advanced capitalism there have existed other for a which have shaped people's political consciousness, served as networks for exchange of information, rumour and gossip, and also provided settings for cultural expression"(p.6). Fourthly, Jürgen Habermas's Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1989) lacked references to the complexities and contradictions of meaning production" as well as "to the concrete social settings and cultural resources at work" (Dahlgren 1991: 6). Finally, Nicholas Garnham (1986) argues Habermas conceives of public sphere on an individualistic basis, "an assumption, which seems to me wholly unrealistic, that all participants possess complete information and engage in all debates," (ibid: 44). Consequently, this means that there is no space left for the expert knowledge and decision makers in dealing with the political and societal problems "thus it becomes difficult to handle the problem of the role of those who in fact manage the conduct of the information-gathering and debate which is the Public Sphere's *raison d'étre*, namely, in particular, journalists and politicians themselves. It is a further result of this weakness that the theory has no place for what I regard as an essential and central organizing institution within the Public Sphere, the political party" (ibid: 45). Fraser (as mentioned in Butsch 2007) argues that some kind of state regulation is necessary for ensuring a healthy public sphere to avoid the domination of one's interest over others.

Despite all criticisms underlying Habermas's account of the transformation of the public sphere, many of his ideas remain significant, mainly the need for common spaces to facilitate public debates about their

concerns and issues of common interest.

5. DISTRUST OF REPRESENTATION: PUBLIC SPHERE AND THE MEDIA

The role of the media in shaping and democratizing public sphere has become a centre of argument for many researchers due to the increasing forces over media content (see Carpignano et al. 1993; Curran 1991; Noelle-Neumann 1991; Habermas 2006). The concept of public sphere, in fact, can be used in many areas, like the social movements, theatre, cinema, news media and citizen journalism.

Yet, Habermas was pessimistic about the role of public sphere in the 19th and early 20th centuries due to the growth of technological-organizational co-ordination in media and the domination of both the private sectors and political parties over the public affairs (Dahlgren 1991). Habermas contends that public opinion is no longer the outcome of rational-critical debate but the result of economic concentration and the media. In the discussion about politics, mass media and public sphere, Carpignano et al. (1993) argue "there is a common ground, a mutual acceptance of basic premises, shared by participating politicians, conservative ideologues, and leftist cultural critics. Its unquestionable truism is that the mass media today *are* the public sphere and that this is the reason for the degradation of public life if not its disappearance" (p.93). Curran (1991) discussed the role of media in informing and facilitating the public debates; "the media are thus the principal institutions of the public sphere or, in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century liberalism, 'the fourth estate of the realm'" (p. 29).   However, unlike the role of print media in the late eighteenth century in enabling public sphere, it is argued that the mass media today threatened both the public sphere and democracy.

As cited in (Ubayasiri 2006), California University researcher Mark Poster argues the mass media have weakened the role of public sphere for political debates: "contemporary social relations seem to be devoid of a basic level of interactive practice which, in the past, was the matrix of democratizing politics: loci such as the agora, the New England town hall, the village Church, the coffee house, the tavern, the public square, a convenient barn, a union hall, a park, a factory lunchroom, and even a street corner. Many of these places remain but no longer serve as organizing centres for political discussion and action. It appears that the media, especially television but also other forms of electronic communication isolate citizens from one another and substitute themselves for older spaces of politics" (p.7). The traditional liberal political theory which is rooted in the eighteenth century defines three functions for media in a democracy which are acting as: watchdog, agency of information and debate and publics' voice to the state (Curran in Curran and Gurevitch 2000: 121,127,129). However, as media representation displaces active participation of citizens in the public sphere, the role of media in civil society becomes an issue. Noelle-Neumann believes that the media are the central force that accelerates the spiral of silence, especially in democratic decision making. She argues: " I have never found a spiral of silence that goes against the tenor of the media, for then willingness to speak out depends in part upon sensing that there is support and legitimation from the media" (Noelle-Neumann 1991: 375).

In his keynote address to the media researchers at the ICA conference in 2006, Habermas questioned about the potentiality of public sphere in creating an epistemic dimension to political decision-making. His main concern was about the domination of non-deliberative communication over the political communication in the public sphere. Habermas argued that " there is a lack of an egalitarian face-to-face interaction and reciprocity between speakers and addressees in a shared practice of collective decision-making" (Rasmussen 2007: 1). Habermas (2006) pointed to the role of the power of the self-regulated system of the mass media in selecting and shaping information. Also, he discussed the political power role in influencing the news agendas in the mainstream media. Today the state and private corporations become the major threats for promoting a healthy public sphere. Capitalism and media monopoly turned the political public sphere into a commodity by serving the interest of private organisations over the people. Alternatively, the state owned and operated media tend to represent the public sphere in a way that benefits the state strategies and policies rather than the people. The question rises behind these conditions, how the mass media can represent and reflect the public sphere when also powerfully pulled to serve commercial interests and the state.

In recent times, the social media, like Facebook, Twitter, blog and YouTube has become contested terrain, a new platform for class struggle and pro-democracy movements. As it was witnessed in the outbreak of revolution in the Arab world, user generated content creates a new form of public sphere to facilitate debates on a common concerns and confront the power.

6. SUMMARY

The aim of this chapter is to discuss the roles of mass media that most closely match the idea of democratic

governance and contribute in creating a deliberative public sphere.

This paper suggests that in order to understand how the media operate in a particular society, we must discuss and analyse the forces that shape media content inside and outside the media organisations. The media are accused for weakening the public sphere, as they are functioning to serve the state or power holders' interests rather than produce meanings that represent how things really are. The state owned media, for example, function to represent the public sphere in a way that promotes the government policies rather than the public. This, however, contradicts Habermas's view of the ideal public sphere which is free and independent from such constrains. The debate rises behind these circumstances, how the mainstream media can reflect the public sphere when also forced to serve power elites. However, as media representation displaces active participation of citizens in the public sphere, the role of media in civil society becomes an issue.

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