



Journal of Contemporary Politics

Original Article

Media as A Catalyst of Conflict

Venugopal B Menon^{1,*}, Anisha Gupta²

¹Formerly Principal, Chinmaya College, Layam Road, Tripunithura, 682301, Kochi, India

²Advocate, Madras High Court, Chennai, India

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25.03.2023

Revised 12.05.2023

Accepted 23.05.2023

Published 06.06.2023

* Corresponding author.

Venugopal B Menon

venubmenon@gmail.com

[https://doi.org/](https://doi.org/10.53989/jcp.v2i2_6_Venugopal)

[10.53989/jcp.v2i2_6_Venugopal](https://doi.org/10.53989/jcp.v2i2_6_Venugopal)



INTRODUCTION

... I say to you: that we are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. And we are in a media battle for the hearts and minds of our Umma.

Ayman al Zawahiri, (2005)

In this era of technology and globalization, the role of the media as a catalyst of change has been widely appreciated. But, while the media has been hailed for empowering the masses, it has also been brought under the scanner for instigating political movements around the globe. The media has been regarded as the fourth estate to the three tier bureaucratic system that acts as a means of checks and balances. The efficacy of this public watchdog will be

examined through this paper.

The media consists of all institutions that produce and distribute all forms of knowledge, information and entertainment. The mass character of the media is attributed to the large and undifferentiated audience that has the ability to shape attitudes, values and perceptions. In a democracy the government uses different modes of communication to legitimize its actions which is intertwined in social and political relations. The role of the media is to pass ideas, information and attitudes from person to person by negotiating consent between people. In democracy a sophisticated and complex process of communication operates. The paper also attempts to analyze the complex role of communication exercised through the mass media in a democratic society.



Although the media comes off as the biggest critique of every act or event, it faces its own share of criticism for covering the truth or exposing too much of it. The news media is central to every nation's economic, cultural, political and social well-being. Global news media plays an important role in building bridges between countries as consumers over the world rise in unanimity today to all global issues, helping foster the spirit of a global community.

With globalization and commercialization of the media, governments and capitalists have often used the media as a platform to further their own propaganda model. In Section II the role of media in institutionalizing the masses will be elucidated by critiquing the limited nature of media. When the wealthy and powerful use the media solely for profit motives, it becomes a tool to manufacture their required consent as opposed to providing a fair platform for dialogue. A fundamental question that is still widely debated is how much of the truth should the media reveal? The effects of disclosing too much information can be productive and counter-productive at times, and the same will be examined in Section III. The media also tends to make blatant assertions, accusations and assumptions while passing moral judgments against members of the public. Be it the Aarushi Talwar case, Sunanda Pushkar, or Sheena Bora, the media has not hesitated in declaring a person guilty to appease the public and render road side justice. Media trials and the shaming culture over social media have not always produced the desired results as discussed in Section IV of the paper.

MANUFACTURING CONSENT

The media bridges the information asymmetry between the State and the masses. An individual acquires knowledge and an understanding of the society and politics from what they read in the newspapers, magazines, "see on the television and hear on radio and through the new media called internet." The media thus plays an important role in moulding public opinion in the society. The media as a separate institution driven by its own interests, practices, norms and values plays an integral role in paving way for new ideologies that shape the society. The media therefore is an indissoluble part of the contexts, messages and relationships that creates and gives shape to politics and public life.¹

In every liberal democracy the media plays an integral role as the freedom of speech and expression is extended to the press and the media acts as a counter balance to keep the spirit of the democracy in check. The successful democracy promotes media in order to:

- Foster public debate and political engagement
- Act as a public watchdog
- Redistribute power and political influence
- Serve as a mechanism to strengthen democratic institutions

- Promote education by providing a public forum for meaningful and serious debate
- Widen access to information
- Facilitate political and social activism.

The complexity of modern public life and the difficulty of comprehending the role of media in reproducing public life arise from the plethora and interconnectedness of various communicative modes.¹

The news media is no longer an independent body, as it is majorly controlled by wealthy businessmen and politicians. The independent voice of free speech today has no financial or social backing whatsoever. Post the 1991 New Economic Policy, even the media sector faced privatization and globalization and there was de facto regulation of the media sector by the Indian government.² The competition in the media industry has led to the dilution in the standard of journalism, as news channels are driven by TRP ratings, popular votes and profits, then a social welfare motive. The commercial incentives in media have diluted professional commitment. The trend has increased with globalization and neo liberal policies. Today the media is accused of creating "commercial homogenous theme parks" through consumerism and by subverting the rich diverse cultures of the world.

The propaganda model of media is controlled largely by the political and economic giants who seek to hide their true intentions through the scrutiny of public opinion. Most biased choices arise from pre-selection of right-thinking people, internalized preconceptions and adaptation of personnel to constraints of ownership, organization, market and political power.³ Mass opinions are being manufactured, while curbing all space for individual freedom. The inequality of power and wealth limits the nature of media critique. News filters are run through the hands of those in power, which subjects media to the brunt of the capitalistic market. The media filters the information and concentrates on few issues and subjects that lead the public to view those issues as more important than other issues.⁴ Such filters are based on the priorities that those in power seek to establish in society and that which gets the TRP ratings to soar. Most news on social and judicial activism is saved for the smaller columns where advertisements don't brighten up the back pages. What do the masses really want to know? The role of the media from a watchdog has been reduced to that of a lapdog.

Media advertisements were also a prime factor that facilitated the propaganda model of the media. The competition in seeking revenue through advertisements had led to commercialization of the media sector. Soon no independent newspaper could compete in the market without advertisement support that lead to the death of various newspapers like The Herald, News Chronicle, The Sunday Citizen, etc.³ In the case of some big newspapers, revenue from advertising constitutes as much as 60 % of total



revenue. The top 15 advertisers account for three fourth of advertising revenue of newspapers and television channels. Except for Dabur, Tata, Bajaj and Videocon, all other top advertisers belong to multinational category. There has been a wave of foreign brands recently - all giving a big boost to media as well as consumerism.⁵ Even Doordarshan's programming today is based on the guiding formula and criteria promoted by foreign-dominated agencies having their interest in big corporate. Companies that pay handsomely for advertisements act as a good source of revenue. Soon corporate start to gain leverage over the media and seek to manipulate the news to give good reviews to cover up for any possible criticism that might tarnish their image. The link between power, money and imagery can be subtly read between the lines.

The mass media promote democracy by widening the distribution of power to the public. The media has the capacity to significantly enlarge access to information and opportunities for exchange of information. The media uses the public to facilitate a means of dialogue and gauging what the public opinion is. The exposure to the news media is a routine activity. The media would cease to exist without the everyday involvement of the public.

It was a general belief that media was bereft from politics and corruption. However, with the involvement of political heads in the ownership and commercialization of the media, corruption has become rampant. The State has overstepped its power into the fourth independent estate. The tussle of political power in Indian news can be best witnessed in Tamil Nadu. The two leading TV news channels in the state belong to the two biggest political parties - DMK and AIDMK. The TV channels Sun TV and Jaya TV are used by either party when in power in furtherance of their political agenda. The ideology of each party is reflected through their very own news outlet that provides them with a platform to reach out to the public at their own convenience, while rising as a bigger political candidate than the other. The current Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2015 has also identified the potential that the news media has to influence the masses, and uses his weekly show 'Mann Ki Baat' to reach out to the masses. Such political propaganda is used to justify the policies of the government and gain popular consent through the media.

However, in recent times questions have been raised on whether the media can act as a genuine custodian of democracy? Critiques have questioned mass media's democratic credentials and some even arguing that they are capable of undermining the spirit of the democracy by manufacturing consent. For example, Chomsky has examined the degree to which the mass media can subvert democracy by mobilizing support for imperialist foreign policy goals.³ The complex web of politics and media has its primary focus on "image" and strategy at the expense of covering substantive issues. Such trends create a symbiotic

relationship between the media and the political elite with vested interests that ultimately curbs the freedom of press. This exposes how politics uses media and how media covers the political world. The mass media is becoming a classic example of "power without responsibility."⁶

The role of the media in policy decisions is certainly questionable. The media has often been used as a platform to instill faith in a certain ideology or decision by glorification of the possible outcomes. The US justified its 'war or terrorism' claiming an imminent threat from Saddam Hussain's supposed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Years of war and conflict can often be justified and glorified through the media much like the United States of America continues to do. The media are grappling to keep up with the proxy wars and the diplomatic relations that the US shares with other nations while maintain a neutral stance. The media is merely a puppet that countries use as an illusion to create 'friendly' international relations. The strings are controlled by the politicians, while the masses watch as mute spectators. Where is the ray of light out of this falsity if the media cannot step up to reveal the truth?

In the early 1900s when US invaded Nicaragua, the US media prominently covered the resulting bloodshed. The US government had won the war but was 4 weeks late on the schedule and the number of casualties of US soldiers and Nicaraguan civilians were extremely high. Many members of leading newspapers and news channels strongly opposed the US invasion and this reflected in their selective coverage. It seemed like the US government had won the war but lost out on popular public support of their own men who were devastated by the loss of their loved ones for a questionable cost. The American President summoned a meeting for the owners of leading media houses to control the escalating disaster that was no longer just military but also political.⁷ While justifying his extremely difficult decision to put an end to the violent communists in Nicaragua, he sought support from the American media in celebrating their 'win'. The opposition by the media personnel was in vain when the President used his power as the law maker to curb the Freedom of Press in the best interest of the nation. In the conflicting interests of the government and the public, the media is used as the tool to glorify the greater interest of the government either by will or by force. America's war on terrorism still continues. Many global media centers in the 21st century do critique and question the validity of the US invasions which has created a counter wave against the American superpower. However, the limited reach of this wave has failed to make it all the way to the shore.

As spectators and readers, when do we begin to see past mirage and start identifying the truth? As Daniel Hallin puts it, at the time of consensus the media are "consensus maintaining institutions" but when consensus breaks down, "they contribute to an accelerating expansion of the bounds of political debate."⁸ In a nutshell the media tends to defend



the status quo and “serves to mobilize support for the special interests that dominate the state and private activity”^{3,6}. The propagandistic role of democratic media is not in any way different from state controlled media under dictatorships and communist establishments. It seems fair to arrive at conclusion that often mainstream media are by and large establishment institutions. Even if they have the autonomy, they willingly wash their hands with the dirty politics or are forced to do so as in the above case.

BUILDING OR BREAKING BARRIERS?

We live in a country where the routine reality is gut wrenching, where on one side of the road you will find Asia's biggest slum and on the other side similar match box sized enclosures of corporate offices, where you will find inspiration amidst the disparity. What one chooses to seek out of this is largely reflected by the media. The news media can have a strengthening or a debilitating effect over an individual or a nation depending on how the media chooses to portray it. The purpose of the media is to inculcate a set of beliefs or value system while striving to maintain a neutral stance. However, the news media is being used to promote negative messages that are fueling conflicts across the globe.

Robert Picard⁹ in 1986 formulated a popular theory about how media coverage on terrorist activities leads to an increase in terrorism. Terrorism is fundamentally about influence. The aim of terrorists today is primarily to attract attention, and to appeal to the sentiments of people in order to emerge victorious. Irrespective of the bloodshed, if a terrorist attack gets wide media coverage, it would be considered a success. Although studies have shown that media coverage of a terrorist attack does not lead to an increase in terrorism, it triggers xenophobic sentiments and draws supporters towards a ‘greater cause’. A big question arises on who is actually responsible for the death, destruction and misery. The live coverage of the 26/11 siege in Mumbai by the media was highly criticized as it gave not only Indians but also possibly the masterminds of the attack a continuous update of the hostage situation. Moreover, post the 9/11 attack in the US and the 26/11 attack in India, the world has viewed Muslims through a dark veil of suspicion on account of the media trials.

Large political powers have long been criticized for manipulating the news to foster their own ideologies, in support of their own policies and even illicit acts. Governments and terrorist groups reach out to the hearts and minds of individuals to justify their illegal activities, be it an attack on a country or a civilian. The media is used to send out strong messages across the globe and to initiate a discussion to draw sympathy towards a particular cause. Post the 1990's a debate sparked the news about the ‘CNN effect’ and the ‘Al Jazeera effect’ which typically dealt with the effect of media in instigating political movements. The CNN effect studied the effect of media in formulation of foreign policies.

The impending terrorist threats in countries like Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, etc. led to military intervention from countries like US and France.

On the other hand, many scholars believe that the Al Jazeera effect triggered the Arab Uprising in 2010. The political heads of the Middle Eastern countries felt threatened by the criticism of their hegemony and the tyrannical rule by the Al Jazeera. The social journalism by Al Jazeera sparked a revolution in the Arabic peninsula. The uprising that broke out in Egypt was captured from radically different perspectives by the local media and by Al Jazeera. While the former aired a rosy picture of the Tahrir Square, the latter covered the violence and the bloodshed. Human tendency has become such that we reflect over the crisis of the moment depending on the stance that the news channels take. On one hand the covered up truth misleads the masses, on the other hand the truth is so dismal that it leaves a black mark for the rest of the world. The truth is often ambushed by contradicting views over a conflict, coupled with asymmetric information, which worsens the strife even more.

The stereotypes and misconceptions portrayed over the media have created a certain animosity between cultures. Africa is viewed as the land of poverty; Muslims are branded as terrorists; Americans as racists and off late Indians as rapists. When an event occurs, the role of the media is to provide an unbiased and fair reproduction of the material facts. A certain amount of detachment is always welcome to a journalist, and sensible reports are careful to cultivate a reputation for it.⁷ The journalist's selection of material facts plays an important role in factoring public stereotypes. For example, let's say a robbery took place last night. Along with the name, age and description of the thief if the news story also covers the nationality, color or race of the thief, it creates a certain stigma in the eyes of the society. The society will construe an added bias if he was described to a colored African Muslim. By this act of choosing material facts the reporter progresses from being the mere conduit of facts to being the determiner of their relevance. And that inevitably raises the question: relevance to what?

The negative portrayal of civilizations over the media is doing more to ignite a fire, than to put it off. The Indian Government recently banned a BBC documentary titled ‘India's Daughters’ on one of India's most horrifying rape cases. The Government justified the ban claiming that the documentary incited violence and that it portrayed Indians negatively. The line of reasoning adopted by the Government has been widely criticized, but it sadly had been proven to be true when an Indian was denied a job in Germany on the ground that he came from ‘a land of rapists’. Negative and unwanted outcomes such as this have time and again led to the question on whether the media has the right to portray situations in a way it has interpreted it? Or should the media remain objective when broadcasting news about such sensitive matters?



The choices that the media are forced to take are inevitable, but is the bias inevitable as well? The journalists are entitled to give their subjective opinions on issues, but these opinions are to be based on a set of objective set of facts. The facts cannot be tainted to suit the majority and popular perceptions as this partiality created a prejudice. It is essential for news reporters in their profession to strike a balance between garnering public opinion and creating an unnecessary conflict. While it might be difficult for the media not to pass a value judgment, it must also seek to uphold the spirit of the minority and protect the counter thesis on the other side of the debate.

MEDIA TRIALS

The media has been chastised for passing value judgments based on their own version of facts. Media trials have plagued the nation as readers tend to overlook the word 'alleged' that precedes a charge against a civilian. The media is undoubtedly seen as a custodian of justice, but does it have the power to take law and order into its own hands? With emerging social media, a new platform has been created to express one's opinion. This has had both positive and negative ramifications. Today a scared victim of a crime is more easily identified through social media as it is a more approachable platform to share one's trauma than knock the doors of the police in absolute vain. It has provided a platform for those trembling voices that have no recourse in law. This has resulted in a trend of public naming and shaming. But can this road side justice be justified or is it a mere rant of emotions that has counter-productive effects?

Media is considered to be the messenger who carries good, bad and ugly news to the reader but the media in some instances is turning out to be an anti-thesis to freedom of expression. Social media is full of choicest superlatives as it has become an arena for political debates and an easy avenue to pronounce quick judgments. It has become easy to outrage or shame a person or organization without caring to hear out the other side. Probably "Online public shaming is a useful and effective strategy for calling out unacceptable behavior when recourse to other remedies is tedious and time consuming but it leads to mob justice." The casualty is content quantitative and qualitative. The visual media is more a noisemaker with a spit and run approach. The media should be expending the space for inclusive news rather than becoming one-man judge and jury under the banner of freedom of expression camouflaging their commercial interests and connections.

Shashi Tharoor, a lawmaker and former minister, himself a victim of media blitz after his wife's death under mysterious circumstances last year that is under investigation, laments that India's "Fourth Estate serves simultaneously as witness, prosecutor, judge, jury and executioner. In ancient times, India put its accused through agni pariksha —

a trial by fire; today, we put them through a trial by media."¹⁰

The Indian Supreme Court was faced with the grim question of drawing the line of freedom of speech and expression extended to the press during an ongoing trial. The court said it has evolved the constitutional doctrine of postponement as a preventive measure to avoid journalists being hauled up for contempt of court every now and then for prejudicing the accused and interfering in the administration of justice with their reports. It ruled that the order for postponement of reporting of trial proceedings would come under the reasonable restrictions imposed on right to free speech under Article 19(2) of the Indian Constitution.¹¹

Today the only code that media follows seems to be "everything is fair in love and war and breaking news". This indicates the total commercialization of the news industry and the medium of expression is turning out to be a show of Media vs Media resulting in a no-holds barred parallel trial by the media. It is not only doing injustice to journalism in all its form, but is also fast emerging as a tool of vigilantism. It has pushed the media industry to the precipice of credibility. Thus, today the threat to the independence of the media is not only going to be from politics but also from within. Unless the Indian media reversed this trend the Indian media which is perhaps the most fearless and independent institutions in the world it would fail as an instrument that has the power to act as guardian of freedom of expression and liberty of the people.

CONCLUSION

In order to restore the credibility in the media as an industry, it needs regulation by media personnel themselves. Despite the influence of the other three tiers, the media needs to retain its stance as an independent tier that represents an objective view point of events, than act as a 'safety valve' for corporates or politicians to propagate their agenda. A balance needs to be struck between formulating opinions and imposing ideologies among the masses so as to facilitate an easier path towards a peace mechanism. The purpose of the media is to provide a platform for dialogue through bilateral communications and not unilateral disposition of viewpoints. The media also requires a lot more sensitivity in addressing issues relating to terrorism and cross border relations that adversely affect the global image of nations. Given the bounded rationality of the masses as a whole, the global media should strive to break, than create barriers between nations by building stereotypes. Every critique receives his share of negative flak.

The public is often gullible and unable to define the nature of power that media has been bestowed with and is not able to place its status and roles in the public life. This places the control in the hands of the media which determines what the public should think by controlling the way in which topics, events, issues and persons reveal themselves.



REFERENCES

1. Craig G. The Media, Politics and Public Life. Crows Nest, Australia. Allen & Unwin. 2007.
2. Rodrigues UM, Ranganathan M. Indian News Media: From Observer to Participant. New Delhi, India. SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd. 2010.
3. Chomsky N, Hermann E. Manufacturing Consent - The political economy of mass media. New York, USA. Pantheon Books. 1988.
4. McCombs ME, Shaw DL. Agenda setting function of mass media. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*. 1972;36(2):176–187. Available from: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2747787>.
5. Rao NB. Foreign Participation in Media. *Economic and Political Weekly*. 2002;37(2). Available from: <https://www.epw.in/journal/2002/02/commentary/foreign-participation-media.html>.
6. Mazzoleni G, Stewart J, Horsfield B. The Media and Neo-Populism: A Contemporary Comparative Analysis. Westport, CT, USA. Praeger. 2003.
7. Mehta M, Sharma SR, editors. Media Conflict With Governments. New Delhi, India. Sarup Book Publishers. 2008.
8. Halin DC, Manoff RK, Weddle JK. Sourcing Patterns of National Security Reporters. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. 1993;70(4):753–766. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909307000402>.
9. Picard R. Media Concentration, Economics and Regulation. In: Graber D, McQuail D, Norris P, editors. The Politics of News: The News of Politics. Washington D.C, USA. CQ Press. 1998;p. 193–217.
10. Mahendra V. Trial by media is now India's way of life. 2015. Available from: <https://www.nst.com.my/search?keywords=Trial%20by%20media%20is%20now%20India%E2%80%99s%20way%20of%20life>.
11. Mahapatra D. Reporting of trial court proceedings can be postponed, Supreme Court says. 2012. Available from: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Reporting-of-trial-court-proceedings-can-be-postponed-Supreme-Court-says/articleshow/16348084.cms>.

