

Freedom and Reform: The Political Power of Mass Media

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How can one settle for less when the world has made it remarkably easy through the medium of *Mass Media*? The “mass media is like a snowball, rolling down the hill. It has picked up the speed. The huge ball has not exploded up yet, but we have started engaging in small snowball fights and “it is a wishful thinking to believe that others on the “me too” bandwagon will survive”.

The arena of media has seen a significant shift within just last fifteen years. It wouldn't be wrong if said that we have shifted from media 1.0 to media 2.0. The version 2.0 began with the demise of Soviet Union and reached its culmination with the 9/11 incident. It has, where, transformed the world from good to better, it has equally created ‘delusions of virtual world power’, leaving the spectators, practitioners, contributors, analysts and commentators in fact the whole kind of human beings at loggerhead on the contributions of the mass media. The minute news hits the wires, it becomes a conversation and, if content is king, the conversation is queen. It has equal effects.

This presentation is aimed at addressing few of the several queries regarding the capability and the capacity or, more precisely, the power of mass media in introducing reforms and promoting freedom. Does the Social Media have political power? Has it been lately the factor behind popular uprisings across the world or it is dependent on other causal variables? Has the virtual world dried out the “existential” capacity of people by making them more active on media than in reality or replaced it? Is it becoming a ‘part of a problem’ or a ‘part of a solution’? and when it comes to Pakistan, such questions are frequently asked; “Is it promoting modernization or westernization?”, “Are our news mediums agenda-based or agenda-specific?”, “Are they empowering people and, thus, promoting democracy?”, “Is our channels providing a platform to terrorists to promote their cause”? and, more recently, “why Veena Malik case has been given a religious touch instead of nationalistic? And why on earth Veena Malik has been given so much space on the electronic and print media” so the list of queries goes on and forth but I would restrict myself to the more broader side of the subject.

Before I began to explore the contributions of mass media at the international and national levels, I would like to dwell upon what the theorists say about the role of mass media in the political and social change of a society and how they affect the human behavior, necessary to the political and social changes.

Theoretical Perspective:

The role and centrality of the mass media in modern society has long been recognized. In 1828, British politician Lord Macaulay coined the term, ‘the fourth estate’, in recognition of the significance the mass media plays both as a social institution and a political forum for debate. Today, a market-oriented media culture has put the media industry at centre stage in any consideration of political change. And this is the reason the popular uprisings in the Middle East

have been factored to the “Political Power of Mass Media” without giving credit to the other factors, namely widespread social unrest, contributions of the core organizations, poor economic performances, poverty, and the strength of growing disgruntled class. However, the development of the relationship between the media and political change and its role and impact in the under-developed region remains unique and a source of disagreement.

John Stuart Mill and his father James Mill first described the media as a critical government ‘watchdog’. By contrast, the Marxist and radical explanations saw the media as a culture industry rendering individuals “less capable of autonomous judgment and more dependent on social processes over which they have little control”. The two theoretical camps, Liberal and Marxist, both agree on the notion that media plays a pivotal role in organizing the images and discourses through which people make sense of the world i.e. media is central to modern politics. However, the disagreement comes over the role of it. The liberals see it as providing a market place for the open debate of ideas over which the consumer exercises power of choice; whereas, the Marxist or neo-Marxist critical perspective focuses on the procedures and relationships underpinning the media and its development, explaining the media as ideological agencies that play a role in maintaining class or elite domination. The fact that media is a conduit for information about the world, is an important thread in classical liberalism, which sees the function of new media as one providing citizens with information on which they can make political choices, vital to a healthy democracy. *Now the reliability of that information remains debatable* as there would be some who would suggest that media performs poorly in this role. Yet, the link between media and politics is unshakable.

In the words of theorist Castells, “Political power becomes dependent on the control of, or the influence on, the apparatus of communication and persuasion – primarily the information and communications technology that is central to what we call the media and, thus, the materials they convey. This is because culture is ‘by and large embedded in the process of communication . . . with the media and Internet at its core’.

Now, while we analyse this all we cannot ignore the environment in which the production takes place and the power relations involved, particularly on an economic basis. It is important to recognize the loci of power within the institutions processing and producing news and entertainment products: ‘who uses it, who controls it, what it is used for, how it fits into the power structure, and how widely it is distributed’

With these two schools of thought, there is another rather modified analytical strand, which is neo-Marxist view. This thought dismisses media as merely a tool of bourgeois propaganda and false awareness and, instead, suggests that the mass media has become an “instrument of domination, impeding the development of social consciousness among the proletariat, and facilitating, even hastening, a decline into the barbarism of totalitarianism”. For them, rather than contributing to the increase of pluralism and democracy, the market has constrained the public space which once was home to civic debate, deliberation, agreement and action. And, this thought or approach of neo-Marxist, synthesized by the Frankfurt school, has been influential.

Marshall McLuhan in 1964 first demonstrated that the media is as such a neutral technology. However, technologies become politicized by the messages they communicate and the influence they seek to effect. He developed a “technological determinist view” that the medium is the message, and that a ‘technology-led theory of social change ... where communication technologies such as television, radio, printing and writing profoundly transformed society and “the human psyche”’. His global village is being rightly described as a virtual extension of the human nervous system expressed as an electronic web, which has created an “Age of Anxiety” as lives are interlinked through knowledge and awareness. He further demonstrated that the technology effects ‘do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance’.

With these thoughts, we further move to see the empirical analysis of the mass media.

The International Level:

The globalization along with technological developments has led to the intensification of world-wide social relations, which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are being shaped by events occurring many miles away. The present day popular uprisings in the Arab world are a spill-over effect or the ambitious soul of mass media trying to take away the credit – it is yet to be analyzed. However, I leave it to my audience with a food for thought that in the older days when there was no such mean as mass media, the European states used to lock their borders to escape the spill-over effects of uprisings in one state to the other and they used to lend helping hands to their rivals, even, to quench the uprisings.

Now, what has had been happening in the last many years that has led to the idea of the “political power of mass media”.

In January, 2001, thousands of people in Philippine angry at their corrupt President converged on Epifanio de los Santos Avenue in Manila, at a protest call being arranged, in part, by forwarded text messages reading, "Go 2 EDSA. Wear blk." Within next few days, the strength of protestors swelled from thousands to a million and close to seven million text messages were sent that week. Eventually, people won. It was for the first that the social media had been instrumental in forcing out a national leader. Hence, a precedent was set.

Similarly, in Spain protests were organized through text messaging against Spanish Prime Minister and his fate was sealed too like Filipino President. In Moldova, Twitter, Facebook and again text messages helped organize mass protests against Communist Party in 2009, which, ultimately, lost power. The church sexual abuse case was exposed by the Boston Globe in 2002. The exposure led to the filing of lawsuits against the Catholic Church for harboring child rapist. More recently, the Arab uprising has spread from Tunisia to Egypt to Bahrain and other states. The mass protests within states were partially helped organized by the mass or social media but they certainly owe their spread to other states to the Mass Media. Would it be right to say that the mass media by spreading the information has led to the rebirth of Arab nationalism or nationalism within Arab nation-states or there were other factors like growing poverty, lawlessness and other such variables that left people with no other choice but to fight for their rights?

The outcomes of media tools have not been yielding the similar results. In Belarus in 2006 protests were arranged, partly, by an e-mail against the President's alleged vote rigging but the protests faltered. In June 2009, thousands of young Iranians carrying smartphones with Bluetooth handsets poured into the stuffy streets of Tehran to protest what they believed to be a fraudulent election. Tensions ran high, and some protesters, in an unthinkable offense, called for the resignation of Ayatollah Khamenei. But many Iranians found the elections to be fair; they were willing to defend the incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad if needed. Iranian society was facing its most serious political crisis since the 1979 revolution. The western covered it as how the Internet was ushering in democracy into the country. "The Revolution Will Be Twittered" was the first in a series of blog posts published by the Atlantic. But, the uprisings were brought to heel by a violent crackdown. Similarly, in Thailand in 2010 protestors occupied downtown Bangkok until the regime used violent means to disperse them. The protestors had used every possible mean of social media to gather support.

Despite, the yes and no effects of social media in organizing the popular uprisings, there are states, which are trying to keep a tight control on the contents of mass media as a precautionary measure to offset the perils of internet freedom. The shared awareness, promoted by the social media, has created "conservative dilemma".

In counter to such censorship measures, the United States has adopted an "instrumental approach" to promote internet freedom abroad. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in January 2010 announced funding for the development of tools designed to reopen access to the internet in countries that restrict it and censor access to website such as Google, YouTube, and the New York Times. Such approach can prove to be dangerous and equally, prove to be counterproductive. In contrast to instrumental view, an environmental view has been rightly promoted. According to which, positive changes in the life of a country follow rather than precede the development of a strong public sphere. Hence, the US attempts to direct the users through instrumental conception can do more harm than good.

Now I further move to the case of Pakistan.

Social Media and Pakistan:

As the title of this seminar rightly suggests, the media industry of Pakistan is still going through its beginning stage. Like any process, it is also experimenting with the ebb and flow. Also, like anywhere else, mass media too has brought changes in Pakistan. However, there is a lack of serious analytical study on the effects of these changes. Several questions are being raised about the role of mass media in promoting freedom and reforms in Pakistan. As am in a race against time, I will address few of the many queries here.

Has Mass Media been promoting Modernization or Westernization? Is it promoting of Democracy? Is it really working for the people or truly the media industry is market-oriented? Is it providing platform to terrorists to promote their views? By airing the videos of militants and the interviews of head of some extremist organizations, the news channels are usually

blamed for helping them in spreading out their agenda. But, it is equally true, that by giving them space, media helps uncover their true faces as well.

Our media is repeatedly being accused of promoting westernization under the label of modernization. It is complained that media is conveying the wrong meaning of modernization by promoting western-style dress code, instead of inventing their own program ideas, which would reflect the local culture, most of them are ditto of what the outsiders are showing. But, in tandem, there is another group of people who think that media has played a significant role in unfettering the society from being ultra-conservative to moderate. The conclusion of these varying views requires a thorough study and survey.

Pakistan is neither a democratic state nor an authoritarian rather a hybrid regime, which keeps fluctuating between the two forms as well as a combination of the two. Is our media helping promote democracy? Democracy is the equal representation of the masses and people's power. If the media is helping promote democracy than, it is frequently asked, why the coverage of vital political events is episodic not thematic.

Here I would like to quote, only one article on Pakistani media, which is easily available on the internet. It says, "With the passage of time reputation of Pakistan's media has sullied due to its failure in thoroughly comprehending affairs. It seems that media contributes to multiply wording over issues and crisis instead of spreading true root causes and facts of the issues. There are numbered of political talk shows and debates on all news channels of Pakistan. Any issue discussed in those programs has no ending and determining words that could help people to understand that either there is solution to these issues or not? Every political program discusses same issue under different names of the program. There is no difference in the information displayed by each program even the views of politicians from different political parties give no hope and track towards the solution of issues. If these programs demonstrate issues successfully then it could help people to pressurize government in a right way to solve the issue".

Television is the most prominent tool of mass media in Pakistan not social media like facebook or Twitter. It is a one thing to have thousands of fans on your page at facebook and totally another that they physically appear to express their support to you.

Television has a long-term, but gradual and indirect behavioural influence. The determinist theory view suggests that through repeated news coverage, the media is able to set the importance of certain issues in the public's mind, and that while the media might not directly affect how the public thinks about political matters, it does affect what subjects people think about, thereby establishing what political issues people consider important. This, then, has raised the question that if the media shape the public agenda, what or who shapes the media's agenda? Equally important, the conventions of journalism – the choice of experts, topic, 'balance', or controversy – shape the way an issue is framed in the public mind. The mass media tell us not only what to think about but also how to think about it. Recently, the coverage of Salman Taseer's murder and, equally important, Veena Malik's participation in Big Boss, is a case in point. The people are divided into two different camps on the issues.

The mass media transmits the information, the flow of which creates transformation. Now this transformation can be positive and bad. However, the effects of bad or positive transformation are determined by the economic environment of any state. I conclude my presentation by saying that “*Social media remains just a buzzword until, you come-up with a plan*”

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