

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA AND SOCIETY

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The relationship between media and society is symbiotic. Society has a history of millions of years while media, especially the mass media, of a little over a century, but both depend on each other for sustenance. Society's survival and growth depend on a number of factors among which a system of communication is crucial, as people in a society get information, education and entertainment through communication. In this block, we shall discuss various pertinent issues relating to media and society such as audience, media literacy and media policies. Such an analysis becomes important as in a short span, media, especially the news media has been able to influence policy and also question those in authority, in the public interest, being the watchdog in a democracy. New media is also expected to take up issues on behalf of the public, articulate public opinion, set agenda for discussion and debate. Over the years, the news media has become so pervasive, that many critics see it as a power institution. In fact, any debate on the mass media oscillates between two extremes, depending on who is saying it.

Some swear by media's unbridled power, while others believe that media do not affect the lives of the people. Whatever may be the view, there is no gainsaying the fact that media have become a part of the everyday life of an average individual.

DEFINING SOCIETY AND MASS MEDIA

A society can be defined as a community of people living in a particular region and having shared customs, laws, and organisations. A society however, can be either homogeneous or heterogeneous. By a homogenous society it is meant a society whose members share similar values, language, religious framework and ethnicity. Examples of such societies include, the Japanese, Chinese, Red Indian and Zulu societies. By a heterogeneous society, it is meant where there will be a diversity of people in terms of race, culture, religions etc. A good example to cite of a heterogeneous society is of the USA, where one finds people from different races. e.g. White, Asians, African Americans, Hispanics etc. inhabit, but follow different religions and speak different languages, though English is the common link language.

Communication is the basic link among various echelons in a society. With the coming of mass media, one finds the society's reflection in news and entertainment programmes. At a micro level, one learns about various groups divided by caste, custom, religion or creed either through interpersonal interaction or through media programming. It is not uncommon to find references to various castes and communities in the media. To give an example in the Indian context, media generally debates and discusses voting patterns based on caste during election times. One finds media covering events and agitations organised

by people belonging to various castes. One has seen coverage of agitation by various caste groups on securing quota for reservation in government jobs and admissions in schools and colleges. The Jat agitation in 2016 in Haryana which resulted in large scale damage to public property and the Gujjar agitation in 2019 in Rajasthan, which saw disruption in train traffic, can be cited as the two examples. The mainstream newspapers in their matrimonial ads also divide the ads based on gender and castes. The purpose of giving these examples is to make you aware on how media reinforces and establishes what happens within a society or group. As the media professionals also come from the same social milieu, so their writings and views are likely to reflect their biases as well.

Historical Context

The element of large-scale (mass) dissemination of ideas was present even when there were no mass media, like the newspapers, radio and television. The people were reached out through meetings, congregations, word-of-mouth, grapevine and inscriptions on varying issues including religious propaganda and citizens' charters. King Ashoka's relics on the iron pillars inscribing the teaching of Lord Buddha have stood the tests of time and can be seen today even after thousands of years. He also spread Buddhism in many countries through his emissaries. This was largely independent of any media in the contemporary sense of the term.

The mass media as we know it today is about a century old and can be traced to when newspapers became available for a few pennies. The period was known as the era of *Penny Press*.

The First World War saw the mobilisation of press and radio for nationalist war aims of contending states. This left little doubt about the power of the media influence on the 'masses', who were effectively managed and directed towards war aims. By 1925, there was already a strongly held view that mass publicity had the power to rule the people and influence international alliances. Late nineteenth century thinkers were conscious of the great transformation that was taking place in which the slower pace of change was giving way to a faster pace. The experience of Nazi Germany and the erstwhile Soviet Union further reinforced this view that mass media could be a powerful source of propaganda on behalf of the ruling elite. Hitler and Goebbels believed that media was an instrument of propaganda and that if a lie was repeated hundred times, it had the potential of becoming a truth. Hitler probably was one of the early powerful men who had an idea about the potential of imagery and media.

After the Second World War, we witnessed a rapid growth of media, which affected all spheres of life. In the development process also, the role of media was recognised and due consideration was given by all societies including the developing world.

While the media has historically been viewed as overly aggressive and insatiable in its enthusiasm for the latest and hottest news, their watchdog function in a democratic society posits that people must know what their governments are doing. The media has the capacity to hold the government accountable, forcing them to explain their actions and decisions, all of which affect the people, they represent. The assumption in some societies is that the press speaks for the people, thus the freedom of speech and freedom of the press acts are seen in the context of the public interest. Any effort, therefore on the part of the government to curtail news media's freedom is seen as against people's right to free and fair information. When during Emergency in 1975-77 in India, press coverage was censored; The Indian Express left the editorial space to denote censorship. "The blank editorial metaphor of censorship was soon adopted by other newspapers, including the Statesman", recorded the paper later. Today, in the era of globalisation, this role of mass media has undergone a sea change. It is often argued that news media has become a commodity. There is also a growing criticism against media for projecting unabashed violence. According to the leftist thinking, media is an important tool to serve specific socio-economic and political interests of the dominant class.

Media academic, Stanley J Baran in his book *Introduction to Mass Communication, Media Literacy and Culture*, quoted theorist Marshall McLuhan to explain the importance of Mass media in our life. Marshall McLuhan would often ask, "Does a fish know it's wet?" The answer, he would say, is, "No." The fish's existence is so dominated by water that only when water is absent, the fish becomes aware of its condition. So is with people and mass media - an average person is so inundated with media messages in her/his everyday life that s/he is often not conscious of the presence or influence of media in life. Media scholars Caren J Deming and Samuel L Becker point out in their book, *Media in Society*, that media operation are too vital to our lives to be disregarded. Indeed, being the fourth and the strongest pillar of democracy, media enjoys a place of privilege in the society. Various scholars and critics have argued that media is not only a mirror of the society but also an instrument of social change. Media must have a close look at the society in all its manifestations with a penetrating eye.

Media theorists Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in their book *Four Theories of the Press* argue that press always take the form and coloration of the social, political structures within which it operates. You have read the normative media theories – Authoritarian, Libertarian, Communist Media and Social responsibility theories in detail in Unit 2 Block1 of Course 1, which are relevant to understand the inter-relation of media and society. Communication scholars Daniel C Hallin and Paolo Mancini while discussing the four theories of press in their book, *Comparing Media Systems: Three models of Media and Politics*, argue, "one cannot understand the news media without understanding the nature of the state, the system of political parties, the pattern

of relations between economic and political interests and the development of civil society among other elements of social structure”.

Information Age Context

Now let us look at how the media has changed in the information age. With the coming of modernity, of which proliferation of mass media has been one of the key outcomes, societies across the globe have undergone a sea change in media reach and access. Media has played a significant role in modernisation, be it the rise of nationalism, individualism, objectivism, democratisation, secularisation or urbanisation. Today almost every aspect of human life is somehow connected to or dependent on the media. It will not be an exaggeration to say that every individual in some or the other way is a media consumer. As per the latest media reports, mobile phones will soon outnumber human beings on this planet! A smartphone with a few centimetres’ screen combines all the media in it that include access to newspapers, television channels, cinema and various social media platforms that connect people through inter-personal communication on one-on-one and group basis.

Information now reaches, to put it proverbially, at the speed of thought. The Internet has indeed made the ‘world flat’, cutting across artificial boundaries of geography, states, caste and creed. There is no gainsaying that without media; society may not be able to conduct its affairs effectively. Later in the unit, we shall discuss the opportunities and challenges posed by the new media, especially in the context of Internet within countries as well as in the international arena.

INTERPOLATION OF MEDIA AND POLITICAL SYSTEM

In a democratic system, mass media play a key role as the very existence of the government depends on the people’s support and this is where the media acquire centre stage in politics. In order to reach out to people, the government needs mass media; and the news media on its part works as a link between the government and the people, as a carrier of information and at other times with its own agenda. When media writes positively, it is not uncommon to find politicians swearing by what is written and broadcast, to deride their rivals; but when media is critical, politicians often blame media for bias and trial against them.

Communication academic Geoffrey Craig in his book, *The Media Politics and Public Life*, says, “the political system exerts a less formal kind of control over the media landscape through personal influence of politicians and political actors on media owners and journalists”. Craig maintains that the influence of political actors over media on a day-to-day basis can be readily observed and realised. Governments have the power to enact legislations through which they can bring considerable pressure on the media. Governments are often criticised for their power to manipulate and manoeuvres media by deciding on which information is

to be released, when and how. Political management of the media also takes place through various types of political communication in the form of media events, briefings, news conferences, interviews, photo opportunities etc. Media being information hungry often ends up publishing what it gets from the sources of authority.

CORPORATE CONTROL OF MEDIA

As stated earlier, the ownership of media has its effect on the content. Business interests own more than 90% media, the world over. In India, the last two decades have been very defining. All kinds of people and interests have some stake in media holdings; these include politicians, political parties, business houses, and national or international conglomerates etc. Media ownership serves two immediate interests for the owners, viz., it is an industry that gives the owner the profit and two, and it lends the owner a voice.

To give an example, Reliance Industries limited (RIL) is said to have taken equity in more than 25 media channels/newspapers. This should be an area of concern for society in general and critics in particular. Hypothetically, let us assume that there is bad news about any of the RIL companies, it will be of empirical research interest to find out how these media channels/newspapers that have RIL stake, cover that news and it will take some time to understand the full import in these media companies.

REGULATION VERSUS SELF-REGULATION

The news media can enjoy the freedom of expression only in a democracy, but it is ironical that it is in democratic countries, one finds authorities obsessed with 'controlling' or 'regulating' the media, and India is no exception. The infamous clamping of emergency on the 25th June 1975 saw censorship and intimidation of media on a large scale. Despite an overt control on the content to which many newspapers fell prey to, some newspapers did not relent. They would rather have a blank editorial or reportage than publishing a censored one. The Congress party suffered a defeat in the elections of 1977 and the serving Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi lost her own seat. The journalists and their professional bodies after the emergency have tried their best to fight and advocate against government regulation, whenever the occasion has demanded. The debates on regulation versus self-regulation have been there for decades, with each side advocating the merits and demerits of a regulated media versus a free media.

Some critics have spoken of another way of 'control' exerted by the government that, they feel, the media in general has found difficult to resist. Both the central and the state governments in India issue advertisements worth thousands of crores of rupees in the print and electronic media. Critics feel that covertly, the governments' controls them denying advertising support. The *India Shining* campaign by the NDA and the *Bharat Nirman* campaigns by the UPA came under

criticism from some media columnists who commented that there was not much criticism in the media on spending tax payers' money, because the various media houses were direct beneficiaries of ad revenue.

Communication academic Geoffrey Craig points out that of late, governments all over have developed a more sophisticated understanding of the needs and functions of media. Craig says that this has resulted in shifting the balance of power in the favour of politicians as media is now too dependent on the information supplied by the political actors. He argues that "the growing cynicism about politics is said to be the consequence of this process. However, this has led to increasing media literacy as people can now easily decode the intent behind the political messages".

MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION

Media is said to be the articulator as well as the moulder of public opinion. It is believed that by putting issues in the public domain, the news media provides various perspectives that help the audience to form informed views and opinions on happenings around them. The media also influences people by its editorials, opinionated articles and debates. American social scientist Kimball Young says of public opinion as the social judgment of a self-conscious community on a question of general import after rational, public discussion. Public opinion, he writes, "is formed by verbalised attitudes, beliefs and convictions, which are essentially emotional and their associated images and ideas. Public opinion often is formulated in a crisis when people differ in their definitions of new situations". He argues, that the stimulus and scope of public opinion have however changed, as "there is an enormous extension of the range of excitation".

American sociologist Herbert Blumer saw public opinion as an aspect of social relations: People confront an issue of concern and explore different solutions to the issue through public discussion. On the other hand, the *Spiral of Silence* theory propounded by political scientist Noelle-Neumann contends that "the mass media are a powerful force, not only in establishing public opinion, but in reducing the number of divergent opinions in the society, as they articulate".

Role of Media in forming public opinion

Noelle-Neumann saw mass media as a powerful creator of social reality through their coverage of public events and different opinions. He argues that mass media serve as the representation of the dominant views in the society. Doris A Graber refers to many articles that criticises journalists of bias against marginalised groups who are shown in distorted light. The authors argue that many examples "demonstrate that there are characteristic, culturally linked patterns of news framing that depend very much on the cultural orientation of the story's narrator."

Elizabeth M Perse looks at the Agenda Setting Theory in the context of the power of the news media to structure the importance of political issues in the public's mind. In other words, she explains that through gatekeeping, the news media select and highlight certain events, people and issues. Because of repetition of issues, people tend to adopt the news media's agenda and start believing that these same events, people and issues are more important than those not covered.

American sociologists Lazarsfield and Merton held that media performed a status conferral function for society by focusing attention on important people, events and issues. The news media do not limit themselves to just establishing the "salience of certain topics". Research has shown that how the news is presented also has a bearing on what people think about issues and events covered.

To take an example of a natural disaster, the cloudburst in Uttarakhand in 2013 amidst heavy rains flooded the regions of Uttarakhand. The incident brought the coverage on the nature's fury and devastation caused in the Himalayan state in the living rooms of the people for weeks together.

Media's attention was not just on the efforts at rescuing thousands of stranded pilgrims, it also brought to attention through its coverage, the various views, opinions, news reports on how the fragile ecology of Himalayan region was utterly disregarded by the commercial developers in connivance with the authorities to reap monetary benefits. It also stressed on the unpreparedness of various administrative agencies in handling a mammoth crisis like that one. The media coverage brought to issue the crisis at not only a micro level but also macro level, cautioning about many more such disasters in store, if all the stakeholders especially the government did not feel concerned about the fragile Himalayan ecology. The various media, especially the mainstream news channels were questioning, grilling and seeking answers from the political bosses on their lackadaisical attitude, especially after the alarm bells were rung by the Comptroller and Auditor General's report months' in advance on the mindless construction work and its possible impact on the state. Media also reflected on how different political parties were trying to make political mileage out of a human disaster through blame games. Media in covering incidents and events become an interpreter of 'reality'. People who watch news get influenced by what appears as news.

Relationship between Media and Society

Media institutions are a part of society. The important reason, why the news media ought to be free and fair, is its watchdog function. The news media is expected to keep a close watch on the government, business and other institutions. It is expected to bring issues in the public domain for debate and discussion. It is therefore incumbent on the part of the government to not only protect the autonomy of the press, but also ensure a free and fair distribution of news to the

public. This is in the interest of ensuring that people who depend on information provided by media to remain updated and connected to the world. Media on its part is expected to share news without fear or favour and help in articulating public opinion on issues that are of concern to them. Media works as a conduit between the public and the powers that be.

NEW MEDIA AND ITS IMPACT ON SOCIETY

The technological development and socio-economic, political and ideological context during 1970s gave rise to 'new media'. The term became popular in the 1990s with the emergence of videos, new ways of delivering television via cable and satellite direct-to-home on a subscription basis. Communication scholars described this phenomenon as the first wave. By 1990s, the home video rental became a very lucrative and popular business. Consequently, film studios began to release the films simultaneously in cinema halls as well as on the videos. (Example: Big corporations like Fox, Warner, and Columbia-Tristar were prominent in the video production and distribution).

With the coming of the World Wide Web, followed by the popularity of social media, the world has not been the same. Many feel that Internet has facilitated democratisation of information; anyone can post anything on the Net and be heard. Internet has cut across artificial boundaries created by geographical borders and socio-economic divide. It has helped create a world community, seamless markets and common consumers. In an era of instant connect, we cannot treat any issue as 'local'. In fact anything happening anywhere in the world can ring a bell across continents. One finds, Internet, especially the social networking sites, including Facebook and micro-blogging site, Twitter becoming a virtual turf for gathering followers and putting forth one's ideology. Despite the fact that the penetration of the Internet is lower when compared with television and print media, but the various social media platforms have seen the medium grow exponentially in the last few years. The reach and access, especially via the mobile phones is expected to grow many folds in the near future.

Evolution of Internet

Let us now understand what is Internet and trace its evolution. Media academic Straubhaar and LaRose describe Internet as "network of networks that connects computers worldwide so that they can exchange messages with one another and share access to files of computer data". As Media scholars Lyn Gorman and David McLean in their book, *Media and Society into 21st Century*, point out that in its early developmental phase, the Internet not only provided a means of communicating and transferring information; it also offered new and alternative modes of expression.

Internet, simply speaking is a network of computers across the world connected to each other to share data. It is also called the web, cyber space, virtual world or

the net as well. This data is available on various websites hosted by the computers. Akin to the real world, one needs to 'visit' a 'site' to get access to data or information. The programmes which help the users access these websites are called web browsers. Tim Berners Lee introduced the first web browser World Wide Web in 1991-92. The web, back then was just an accumulation of static pages containing information in text or pictures. The communication was only one way as there was no method for the web surfer to provide feedback. This was called Web 1.0 version.

Web 2.0 is the version which initiated interactivity on the Internet. The interaction is twofold, with the content and with the people. So, one can today upvote and comment on YouTube videos as well as post on a friend's Facebook page.

Web 3.0 is the future, where the communication will not merely be limited to people across the web, but between machines connected as well. E.g., today when your laptop automatically starts updating some software through the Net, it is communicating with the parent website. Google Search is another example where a programme navigates through all the web pages available on its index to find what the user is looking for.

With such a large network and multiple communication channels and novel methods, the Internet began the era of Globalisation in its true sense. It also gave birth to many powerful corporations like Microsoft, Apple, Yahoo, Oracle etc. These are the software industries working on making computers useful to humans, offline and online. By the year 2000, Internet had heralded significant changes in global communication and removing the limitations of time and boundary. Facilities/services like email led to the instant contact with individuals. Electronic networking proved that Marshall McLuhan's concept of Global Village seemed to be on its way to reality.

Emergence of Social Networking Sites

By late 1990s, blogs emerged on the Web. Blog simply is another word for Weblog. It is a website, hosting text entries in a sequential manner, sharing information and/or opinions on any given topic. Lack of censorship and direct reach to the audience without any gatekeeping made blogs a popular web publishing tool. They soon became a source of information supplementing mainstream media coverage with different views and perspectives. Web 2.0 enabled readers to provide their feedback in the form of comments as well as posting video clips (Vlogs), audio clips (Audio log) etc. By 2003, user-generated content (UGC), the rapidly expanding phenomenon of online social networking through websites such as YouTube, Orkut, Facebook, Twitter etc. emerged on the scene. Everyone could be the audience as well as the producer. With people getting in touch with each other virtually, came the Social Networking Sites (SNS). They allowed people to connect with each other, communicate, share

personal information, photographs, videos, audio clips and opinions online, publicly and privately.

Information is power, is best elucidated by the fact that a simple message on a social networking site galvanised thousands at the Tahrir Square in Egypt. Facebook and Twitter have become the focal point of action/protest in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen. In the Indian context, Facebook and other social networking sites helped mass protest against the rape of a para- medical student in the nation's capital in December 2012. Anti-establishment messages flooding various social networking sites forced the government to take action against the culprits of the heinous crime. Facebook and other social networking sites also motivated people; cutting across age, social and economic barriers to come out in thousands to support anti-corruption movement catalysed by Anna Hazare in 2011.

The Dark Side of Virtual World

First the world was mesmerised by the medium; next it got hooked on it, and then came the side effects that were initially unforeseen. Three major threats to the people populating the Virtual world are:

- 1) Malware: These are malicious software that spread like 'Virus', from one system to another to seek out data unknown to the users. The software copies themselves on each connected system and spy on the activities of the users. In times of Net-banking, these viruses are a threat to personal security, amounting to cyber-crime.
- 2) Surveillance: In order to curb cyber and real-life terrorism, security agencies need to monitor communication happening over the web. Agencies like NSA, FBI etc. intercept, decode and analyse the information being shared over the web, private or public, for national security interests. Some could argue that this is a violation of personal privacy rights.
- 3) Censorship: Even though censorship on World Wide Web is a long-standing debate, some countries, like China and North Korea, ban or limit the use of Internet for their own internal security and others have rules to track and shut down child pornography websites. TRAI banned hundreds of porn websites in India in 2015.

In the light of the above arguments and analysis, the growth of internet as an important mass medium cannot be ignored. As Communication, researchers Morris and Ogan have rightly put, "if we ignore the computer media, not only will the discipline (of mass communication) be left behind," but we, "will also miss an opportunity to explore and rethink answers to some of the central questions of mass communication research." However, Curran and Seaton comment that "The net has changed out of all recognition from its pioneering

days when the vision of the net as the redeemer of social ills was first promulgated. The civic discourse and subculture experiment that so excited early net commentators has given way to an increased emphasis on entertainment, business and electronic mail". The second defect, they say, is that, "it has failed to grasp that inequalities in the real world distort cyberspace, and limit its potential for improving society."

Media scholars Lyn Gorman and David McLean endorse the views of Curran and Seaton by pointing out that social ills have not disappeared with the extension of new technologies; real world politics has not been transformed by the advent of YouTube; global inequalities continue to exclude a sizeable portion of the world's population from access to the internet and all that it offers. They argue that media must be seen in relation to the contexts in which they originate; whether 'old' or 'new' – they cannot be divorced from the 'real world's structures and processes.