

THE MEDIA : IMPACT, CONTENT AND CONTROL

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I must begin with a disclaimer. I am not a media practitioner; this article cannot therefore ground itself in the problems experienced by the professional. Nor is it based on my research on media issues – in any event sporadic rather than sustained. As will be apparent presently it derives its form from a somewhat different perspective – a perspective which has to do with national systems.

In recent months there has been much discussion in the international media, about the changes which are taking place in the countries of Eastern Europe in the management of their media. State control is being relinquished. Radio Moscow reported a few weeks ago that consultants from the West have been invited to advise on this process. In many African countries too, similar changes are under way. It is taken in both regions that an unfettered media is a necessary accompaniment of multi-party democracy.

In popular discussion, this is of course the dominant media issue – the issue besides which all other issues appear trivial, even arcane. Other contributors will, no doubt, deal with this question at some length.

My concern is somewhat different. It is not with the normative question, nor with the degree of freedom that the media should enjoy. It is with a related question: what are the circumstances which influence this level of freedom? What follows is to be taken as no more than a few observations on a complex issue.

Let me avert a possible misunderstanding. By so choosing my subject, I

do not diminish the importance of that other question. As innocent bystanders in the media game, indeed on occasions its victims, we have no option but to argue for a high level of freedom.

Do we then say merely to restore the freedom which we once had? Or are we pursuing a freedom in which the full spectrum of opinion finds adequate representation in the media? If so, it is a freedom which we never enjoyed and it is a freedom which can only exist if monopolies are at their irreducible minimum. This article will, I hope, be of some use in examining the goals and possibilities of this endeavour.

Impact

It is commonly agreed that the media perform many functions. The information that is conveyed covers a wide-range from where we might purchase a toothbrush to happenings of global importance. Instructions has an equally wide range, presented of course in digestible blobs. The media exhort us to follow one course in preference to another to hold this opinion as opposed to that. There is explanation – of everyday phenomena at one end, and of abstracts philosophical and religious issues at the other. And we are entertained – sometimes unintentionally.

It is no longer uncontested media ideology that these tasks are done impartially and objectively even when it is the intention to do so. But if there is dispute on this issue there is none on another. The media are viewed as

powerful, able to influence attitudes, to mould opinion and ultimately to induce changes in behavior. This view is held by those who argue that the media must be permitted a considerable degree of latitude. It is also the assumption of those who hold against this approach and who point to its deleterious consequences in the form of mindless consumerism and dented values.

It must be recognized that opinions, attitudes and perceptions are formed, and changed in a variety of other ways. It happens through the acquisition of knowledge, whether in the classroom or in less formal circumstances. It is brought about by engaging in an occupation. It also happens through the interactions which result through participation in civic and social activities. Briefly the roles individuals play and the contexts in which they do so are potent forces of attitudinal change.

In most circumstances the media produce little impact if they run counter to the perceptions generated by these activities. To this extent, the media are not as penetrative as in commonly believed. Clearly there are ways of thought and forms of behavior which they find difficult to influence and change. Most often they have a reinforcing and a rationalizing function; attempts at transformation, unless these are in the relevant idiom are frequently met with rejection.

It will be apparent then that a media message can appeal to one segment of a country while evoking a very different response from another. Consider a rural community whose exposure to urban influence is moderate rather than heavy. Its economy is relatively enclosed. In many activities its members relate to each other rather than to the world outside. Its dynamic and its values reflect these circumstances. Such a community may well be indifferent or even hostile to message which are clothed in an idiom which is unmistakably urban and westernized.

The point need not be laboured. Class, religion, ethnic group and region are all dimensions in which this dissonance can manifest itself. Content, then, is crucial if the concern is with the impact on the receiving community.

Content and Control

What is it that determines this content? Let me pick out two factors – the nature of the economy and the type of control exercised by the state over the media.

In a strong economy individuals have more access to the media. They can purchase its instruments more readily – TV sets, radios, newspapers and so on. The investment in media is correspondingly high; plant and equipment have to produce a large output. Workforce are substantial, their skills are many and varied, and, career options are diverse and attractive. In these circumstances the media have a high density; that is, the output is high per unit of population.

While the systems of control are varied the two ends are distinct. At one extreme is the control exercised by the state in a one-party political system. At the other end is the system in which formal control is at a minimum, where a disputation idiom conceals a consensus on fundamental values and interests, and, where market forces control much of the medias' activities. In between are many forms in which state control operates in varying degrees. Examples of these are quite abundant both in our own region and in South-East Asia.

In simplified black-and-white terms, let us now examine the relation between economy, control and content. We have the following categories:

(1) Strong Economy/Market Control

The media output has a wide range and a high intensity.

Sensitive political areas are covered.

The stress on the national interest is usually subtle.

(2) Strong Economy/State Control.

The range and intensity are almost as high as in the type above.

Sensitive political areas are avoided.

A particular political position is given strong stress.

(3) Weak Economy/State Control

Range and intensity are both limited. Sensitive political areas are avoided as above.

Similarly a particular political position is given strong stress.

(4) Weak Economy/Market Control

Does not survive for long.

This matrix must be expanded much more to take in all real situations. Even so, some countries fall squarely into one or another of these categories. Those of Western Europe and North America, for instance, possess strong economies and depend on market forces to control their media. Singapore though a strong economy (in the somewhat loose sense in which I am using the term) has no place for market forces in the European or American sense. But in most Third World countries, what has been evident in the last two or three decades is a movement away from market control towards state control. Many of them do not therefore fit nearly into either (3) or (4) above.

Sketching through this categorization it provides the basis for some conclusions:

If the economy is weak, there is a strong tendency towards state control.

* The opposite is not true. State control may also exist in a strong economy.

* While density is a function of the economy, content relate for the type of control.

Types of Control

If these conclusions are valid, the factor which really determines the nature and extent of media impact in any given situation the nature and extent of media impact in any given situation is the type of control (taking the economy and therefore media density as fixed). Nationally at least there are two forms of control. What determines the choice between them?

As examples of the market forces approach the Western countries exhibit

many similarities in the way in which they handle their media. There are also significant differences. In a recent BBC programme the topic of discussion was Nancy Reagan's 'unauthorized biography'. It was generally agreed that while a publication of this type could have given rise to a legal action in the UK, there was little hope of an American Court responding to such a move.

Apart from these differences in the notion of freedom, attempts to limit that freedom do occur from time to time in many of these countries. There was the recent decision to narrow the freedom of expression on American Campuses, followed inevitably by strong protest and reaction. It is I believe, James Scott who said that of all the British Prime Ministers he had known in the course of a long career as a political journalist, only one – Clement Attlee – had made no attempt to muzzle or otherwise interfere with the Press.

In the Gulf War it was clear that the Alliance authorities had decided to allow the media only the most limited access to information concerning the conduct of the war. It was also clear that the reasons for this were not entirely those of security. And between its 'rights' and the national interest, the media had little option but to accept the limits that were imposed.

All this does not reveal an abstract ideal, widely accepted and religiously followed by all. It is much more a situation in which a delicate balance of forces is being maintained with great watchfulness on all sides. What circumstances, what structure does this reflect?

Essentially this is a reflection of distributed power. All constituent units – Capital, Labour, Agriculture, Industry, the Military, Academic, the Arts, Entertainment have some power independent of the state, in this set of countries.

These sectors also exist in the other type of system. Why do they not have a similar power in those systems what are the marks of systems which are characterized by distributed power?

Power in any substantial sense, is not derived from the patronage dispensed

by the state or from the funds that it provides. Many of these sectors have their own independent resources. Their prosperity, their significance in a national scheme of things has at times been achieved in spite of the state. At other times the state has had to accommodate itself for the importance of these sectors so that the continuing conflict with other states may be most effectively pursued. In the other type of system state control is prior. It is the state which takes the initiative to develop these sectors; it provides the foundation and the framework. It also sets the limits.

The historical circumstances of the two types of systems are very different. But even within market control systems there are at least two categories in relation to distributed power. In one category best exemplified by the United States, distributed power follows from the compromise that are essential in the aggregation of smaller units into a larger one. In the other category perhaps best represented by France and England, distributed power into modern form arose from the need to accommodate a new class who represented the strong force of a new commerce.

The Third World

In many Third World countries which were once colonial territories a form of distributed power did exist. This was, in part, an export from the imperial country. It was also stimulated by the desire of the colonial rulers to distribute favours so that the balance between the constituent groups of the territory was maintained. We might have expected that with the coming of independence this pattern would have been strengthened. On the contrary, in most places it was not; a sequence of events undermined it and eventually it was transformed beyond recognition.

Independence whether taught for or not, was accompanied by the promises of the new rulers that the millen un was about to dawn. The reality proved to be otherwise. The realization of the economic potential, whose existence was frequently proclaimed, turned out to be far more difficult than earlier imagined. Even if it had not intended to do so at

first, the state was forced to play a pivotal role in generating economic activity.

Despite these measures, dissatisfaction and resentment began to grow. The new governments were challenged by others who promised to deliver the goods. Unrest, even rebellion followed quickly.

Whether governments changed or not, from that point onwards, survival became the over-riding consideration. For this purpose governments allocated to themselves more and more power.

There was little in third world countries to stop their governments from doing so. Other sectors – trade, industry, agriculture, academia etc – were weak and small. The idiom in which they were reared was of the output variety. They could contribute little in the short-term towards the development of the country.

All faith was reposed therefore in government and with it went out any possibility that power might operate in a distributed fashion. Ultimately the reliance of governments was on the police, the armed services and on a bureaucracy which soon turned to be pliant. In these conditions a free media was at best a luxury and its new role of subservience was soon defined.

Related Areas

This is a generalized account. The sequence was not followed through the identical fashion in all the newly independent countries of Asia and Africa. But it does, I believe, capture the pressure experienced by all of them as well as the responses of the majority.

The processes generated by these pressures were pervasive. They reached and influenced all areas of life. The media was one of these, I would like to pick out another.

In many countries, the new pressure led to a particular style in decision making. The perspective was the short-term; the immediate interest of the governing party was paramount. Decisions were taken in an atmosphere of crisis; there was little time for the gathering of data and for appropriate inves-

tigation. And for all these reasons the decisions had to be taken by a group which was as small as possible.

The result was that the demand for knowledge, except in its narrow quantitative sense, was very limited. The specialist was consulted minimally on matters other than the purely technical or unless he was willing to play the role of the apologist. He was likely to be treated with great suspicion if his skills lay in the analysis of societal phenomena; the possibility of a clash between his views and those of the government were regarded as high. Although the low demand for knowledge led to an indifference to intellectual activity which sometimes amounted to hostility.

The situation might have been even worse but for another pressure that government had to face. In all countries there was a demand for education, as time went on the demand was for a tertiary education. To provide this, staff had to recruited and the universities had to be expanded. It was in the humanities and in the social sciences that this could be done with the lowest outlay. Few governments were happy that they were forced to give support to branches of intellectual activity whose usefulness, from their point of view, was questionable. However, they had little option but to do so.

The point here is a simple one: The control of the media and the stifling of intellectual activity, where the responses in two different areas, to the same set of circumstances. In third world countries, they are usually found together.

The International Context

The freedom of the media is a complex issue, not because ideals cannot be easily stated but because this freedom is linked to the distribution of power in a political system.

This has been further complicated in recent years by another trend. A free media, more particularly a free press, has been used as the measure of the health of a democracy. At times this has even been used as a stick with which to beat countries when they are assessed for the purposes of aid.

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This places Third World governments in an embarrassing position. They state, perhaps not quite correctly, that it would be extremely dangerous to liberalize the media. On the other hand international opinion (and intentions) have to be assuaged by some cosmetic change or at least by the promise of reform.

The freedom of the media has also been given another interpretation with the invasion of one country by the media of another which is more powerful. The right claimed by an American media empire to investigate matters which Singapore claimed were "internal affairs" was a case in point. The argument advanced by US officials, that market forces should be allowed to decide the issue was effectively demolished by the then Prime Minister Lee Swan Yew (his memo in the form of an article was published in a local newspaper some months ago).

A free media relates to rights and liberties which we all cherish and which some of us have the means to enjoy. But while we assert this it is as well to recognize that it is a tool which is also used for purposes which do not have that much to do with our rights and liberties.
