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Department of Social and Environmental Studies
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Essay:

Many researchers see present media structures and practices as a threat to democracy rather than a way of supporting and expanding it. Assess this pessimistic view, selecting those aspects of the issue you find most relevant.

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Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that democracy needs the media to operate as a proper democracy. But especially the last decades have seen an increasing number of voices who question the role of the media in the modern society and who believe that the media cannot fulfil its role properly anymore. There are more and more people who see the media as a threat to democracy rather than an aid.

The media and its relationship to politics, politicians and society has always been an issue in democratic countries, and certain roles for the media in a democracy have emerged from this discussion. But the times have changed and these roles are now under close scrutiny and need questioning and rearranging.

In this essay I want to give a short overview of some points that have been made to back this point of view. I will have a look at the prerequisites to the democratic media-political relationship, summing up the most important roles for the media in a democratic, liberal and pluralistic society and will show how these roles have died away in the modern media environment.

1. Liberal Democracy

The most important point in a democracy is naturally the exertion of power by the citizens. Usually not in means of a direct power, but a representative power, in which they elect their representatives who then act on their behalf to rule the country. This requires the participation of the electorate in the political process which in turn requires the electorate to be, in order to make reasonable choices, informed and rational.

McNair identifies three characteristics of a democracy: constitutionality, participation and rational choice¹. The constitutionality consists of the facts that there has to be “an agreed set of procedures and rules governing the conduct of elections, the behaviour of those who win them, and the legitimate activities of dissenters.”² These agreements are usually written down in a constitution or take a similar form. The second characteristic is participation. Those taking part in elections, voting for politicians or parties, should be composed of a “substantial”³ part of the people. States excluding certain groups of people, as it was the situation in most now democratic countries until the beginning of the 20th century, when women did not have the right to vote, would therefore not have the right to be viewed as

¹ McNair 1995, p. 17

² Ibid. p. 17-18

³ Bobbio, quoted in McNair 1995, p. 18

democratic. The third important characteristic of a democracy is rational choice. This consists of the availability of choice, of being able to choose between different political parties or politicians, and the “ability of the citizens to exercise that choice rationally. This in turn presupposes a knowledgeable, educated citizenry.”⁴

2. The Role of the Media in Democracy

There is a vast amount of literature on this subject, but essentially, in summarising the liberal theories, there is a clear consent under various scholars. The range of responsibilities of the media include the following: the public watchdog, the fourth estate, providing a platform for different interest groups and views, educating the citizenry in a political sense, “meaningful agenda setting”⁵ in identifying the key issues relevant for citizens and the country and providing a dialogue between citizens and government officials. For this essay I want to concentrate on the following: The media as a public watchdog and the information and debate function, as I believe that these are the most important functions and that they are increasingly vulnerable to the recent developments in the political and media world.

2.1 The Public Watchdog

Most scholars agree that the role of the media as a public watchdog is the most important and paramount function of all. To put the state, the government and its officials under scrutiny, to reveal their faults and flaws or to keep them from committing these faults in the first place is seen as the most consequential part of a free media. And here the notion of a free press or free media is constitutive of the watchdog argument. And a free press has one prerequisite: the free market. Only in a free market, it is argued, can the media properly fulfil its role as a public watchdog⁶. Only a media independent from constraints from the government or from politics in any way is capable of revealing wrongdoings in all levels of administration and government.

2.2 Information and Debate

As Curran notes, “the watchdog perspective of the media is defensive”⁷. The public is protected by the media, protected from “those with power overstepping the mark”⁸. A

⁴ McNair 1995, p.18

⁵ Gurevitch and Blumler 1990, p. 270

⁶ We will return to the notion of a ‘free press’ at a later stage

⁷ Curran 2000, p. 127

⁸ Ibid. p. 126

different approach is provided by the media as educators who in this function provide the citizenry with information. This information is ideally diverse, showing opinions of various groups on various issues, unbiased in their party affiliation to the left or to the right. This information is then used by the audience to create their own view of the world, especially the political world. This creates an informed and educated citizenry, participating in political communication and managing and understanding their internal affairs. This is a prerequisite for a representative and liberal democracy.

The 'debate' function of the media aims at the point that the media should provide a platform for various interest groups, or even anyone who wants to express his views and publish them, thereby making them part of the public sphere⁹. This in consequence assists the information role of the media – the more different information available for the public, the better they can form their views and make their choices.

3. Media and Democracy

So far we have seen what roles the media have to fulfil in a democracy, and why these roles are important for a democracy to function properly. I now want to sum up some of the arguments that have been delivered by researchers as to why the media today is not able to assist democracy anymore.

I identified three issues in politics and the media world as main reasons for these problems: The concentration of ownership in media firms, the reliance on advertising to fund these companies (which goes hand in hand with the first point) and the resulting implications on TV programming and scheduling, and the increasing trend towards political marketing as a tool for political communication. We will see how these developments exert severe constraints on the media's ability to follow its roles as stated above.

3.1 Ownership and Concentration

Complaints about concentration of ownership in the media are not new. Since the start of the real mass media with the rise of national newspapers there has been criticism to concentration movements in the media environment. But the recent progressions in concentration are much more significant and have now reached an unprecedented level.

⁹ The expression 'public sphere' comes from the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who sees the public sphere as that area, in which public opinion is formed and generated. It is the place where a freedom of expression and publishing of opinions is possible (see McNair 1995, p 19). Generally, the public sphere today is the mass media, as there is no other place where public opinion nowadays is expressed. However, this idea seems to be timeworn in view of the above arguments.

The media world is now in the hands of only a dozen or so global media corporations owning most of the media in the western world. These companies are not like the local newspaper corporation in your hometown – they own TV stations and newspapers, publish magazines and books, produce movies and TV programmes: it is all in one hand, using all media forms and technologies available on the market¹⁰. These companies include such giants as AOL Time Warner (in fact a triple merger), Bertelsmann and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. In many countries there are regions where there is only one newspaper left responsible for an area, where there were formerly four to five papers¹¹. In Germany, for example, the newspaper publishers of the WAZ Holding¹² now own most of the local newspapers in the western part of the country, thereby having killed-off all competitors, and are in the act of buying Germany's leading quality national newspaper, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*.

3.2 The Free Market

What dangers for democracy come from these developments and how does this affect the media's role as public watchdog and their information and debate function? In fact, all this happened in the name of the free market, being blessed for being the only way in which the press and the media can actually be free. Only without constraints and control from the government or other politicians, it was believed, would media be able to guarantee freedom of expression and a variety of different opinions and act fearlessly as a watchdog to government actions. This could only be achieved by setting the media companies out into the free market, where competition would make it all work and the independence of the companies would generate a prospering and strict journalism. So far the liberal theory.

However, the free market in its actual shape undermines the democratic abilities of the media rather than fostering them. Curran¹³ identifies four different ways in which this happens, related to the information and debate function: Firstly the free market effectively restricts the chances for people to express their views and publish them. The costs for setting up a newspaper now, have by far exceeded the monetary potentials of ordinary people, not to speak of a private TV station. Setting up a website is easy and almost for free, but it never reaches the masses. Curran notes "the public sphere has been rendered inaccessible ... by the high cost of entry."¹⁴ The second restriction made by the free market is that it actually reduces the variety of information and finally leaves people less informed. In their struggle to gain

¹⁰ See Dahlgren 2001, p. 71; and Curran 2000, p. 130

¹¹ See Röper 1994; and Lichtenberg 1990

¹² WAZ stands for Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung

¹³ Curran 2000, p. 128-29

¹⁴ Curran 2000, p. 128

more and more readers or viewers the media companies grab hold of what promises the biggest audience. This usually comprises of human interest stories, as these stories are read by nearly everyone. Political coverage, however, only reaches a specialized and over all small audience. These developments are valid for both TV and newspapers. Thirdly, Curran notes, the free market lowers or even restricts the possibilities for people to participate in public debate, and, fourthly, it “undermines intelligent and rational debate”¹⁵, as the media tend to oversimplify, personalize, rely on images rather than on content and overall prefer stereotypes over human complexity.

Keane (1991) has the same attitude towards the media and the free market:

*“Communication markets restrict freedom of communication by generating barriers to entry, monopoly and restrictions upon choice... In short, it must be concluded that there is a structural contradiction between freedom of communication and freedom of the market...”*¹⁶

The Swedish scholar Tännsjö¹⁷ goes the same way or even a bit further. He wants mass communication to be ‘sound’, which is actually just another expression for a democracy-assisting media in the way we have seen above. He also feels that the free market is essentially the factor making mass communication un-‘sound’: “The main threat to sound mass communication (...) comes from the media themselves, from the process of concentration of capital and centralisation of ownership...”¹⁸.

We have now seen how the media reality and the free market can restrict the information and debate function of the media. But how does it affect the watchdog role?

In Curran’s opinion the watchdog role of the media is important, though he sees no need for it to be the most important role of all. Furthermore, he calls for an expansion in the responsibilities of the watchdogs in the direction of the private power¹⁹. Still, the media is the only institution that can bring faults of politicians to the public. But there has been a steady decline in encouraging journalists to act as watchdogs, to carry out the so-called ‘investigative journalism’.

¹⁵ Ibid. p129

¹⁶ Keane 1991, p. 89 (original emphasis)

¹⁷ Tännsjö 1985

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 557

¹⁹ Curran 2000, p. 124

As a fact media conglomerates today are really big business. We can assume that the state is generally fond of big businesses in their country: they create labour, they pay taxes, and they are overall responsible for economic growth in a country. And the businesses in turn have to rely on the state to create an environment where they can prosper and work and make their money. Now there is a contradiction: the media is supposed to be independent from the state (what all the fuss about the free market was about) and still they have to keep in touch with the government. Herman and Chomsky²⁰ identify overall five filters, by which journalists and the media in general are affected and therefore are constrained in reporting unbiased and accurately of the events in the world. The first two filters of their ‘propaganda model’ are also concentration of ownership and the reliance of those media conglomerates on advertising. Herman and Chomsky note that media businesses are just like other big businesses linked with conglomerates outside their original occupation, as for example via advertising. Hence they have enough incentives to kill critical stories and thereby restrict investigative journalism.

In their efforts to satisfy their advertisers and the consequentially arising quest for the greatest possible audience, the TV stations and newspapers have unified their programmes to a homogenous mash of human interest stories, as we have seen above. As there is only limited time for broadcasting per day (typically 24 hours) and human interest occupies most of the space, there is rarely any place left for substantive investigative journalism. Not only does this genre attract only small audiences and is hence not very appealing to advertisers, it is also very costly and so fundamentally contrasts everything big media wants: cheap programmes who attract a huge and happily consuming audience. All this results in changes, not only for investigative programmes, but also for normal news programmes: they will either be scheduled to another, less popular slot, or erased from the programme completely.²¹

3.3 Political Marketing

Political marketing as a means of political communication had to start when the electorate became a mass electorate – when the suffrage was finally enlarged to all areas of the society. With a mass electorate the only way to reach it is with mass media. Hence political marketing concentrates on the mass media to achieve its goal. In fact it relies mainly on television, as this is today the main source for political information for people²² and it is believed to have the greatest effect on people with its moving pictures – the attention is

²⁰ Herman and Chomsky 1994

²¹ For examples see Curran 2000, p. 128

²² Moog and Sluyter-Beltrao 2001, p. 37

captured through “drama, symbolic effect, or emotional appeal”²³. Viz, television is the “prime target for politicians attempting to communicate with potential supporters.”²⁴

Now more than ever there are great opportunities for politicians to promote themselves via the media. The number of media outlets has grown steadily and the use of media by the people has increased, too. A result is that politicians seek the media more and more to use it as a political communication tool while early methods of communication, like giving speeches to masses in a town – the face-to-face politics or soap-box politics – are neglected and have nearly vanished. But how does this effect democracy and are the media to blame for it? In their extensive use of shaping politicians, making a brand out of them, relying on images than on substance, in oversimplifying and trivializing politics to an unprecedented extent²⁵, the politicians serve the media just what they want. The media does not want extensive explanations of budget problems; they need a picture. They don’t want a lengthy party manifesto; they want a soundbite, a slogan. This again relates to the above-mentioned commercial pressures on the media. When there is no money left for real journalism, they have to rely on “pre-packaged material”²⁶. When the audience wants to have images and human interest stories, the media will give it to them – they sport a show about the president’s vacation, for example.

Another point relating to the human interest area is the ‘hyper-reflexivity’ of the media’s political coverage²⁷. As political marketing is taking over politics, with its pollsters and campaign strategists, the media devotes a good deal of broadcasting time to exactly this process. As the soundbite length in general shrunk to less than 10 seconds in the last few years²⁸, the politicians have to campaign even harder, and this will be covered at even more length than before. It is a circle where there seems to be no escape.

What is finally the result of all this? Substantial politics is turned into ten-second soundbites, politicians sell images and no longer policies, parties turn into brands and what does this mean to our above stated media role? It is again corrupted. The information role is completely neglected. There is no longer any information available. Everything is images and blurring sound.

²³ Ibid. p.34

²⁴ Ibid. p.37

²⁵ See Franklin 1994, pp. 9-10

²⁶ Street 2001, p. 198

²⁷ Moog and Sluyter-Beltrao 2001, p. 38

²⁸ Ibid. p. 41

Conclusion

We have seen how weak and fragile the democratic role of the media today is and how easily it can be subverted by today's pressures in the commercialised world, by the "chill winds of the market"²⁹. There are far more implications than this short essay is able to delineate. We have not looked at the actual consequences on the citizens, the impacts on voting behaviour and general political participation, the increasing cynicism of voters about media presentations of politics and so forth. We have not looked at the effects these developments have on public broadcasting, typically to some degree regulated by government and not financed by advertising. But one thing has to be mentioned: there is some agreement that public broadcasting is still better in the view of media-political relations than private media. Curran notes "successful public broadcasting comes closest to embodying the liberal idea of informed, rational and inclusive public debate."³⁰ Also, the deeply free-market critical Tännsjö finds: "A movement towards sound mass communication can only begin if freedom of expression is severely restrained"³¹, crying out for more governmental control in broadcasting and media systems.

Still, even in looking at all this evidence for de-democratisation, there is one thing to bear in mind: without the media, a democracy would not be a democracy, in which condition the media may be. A mass media is the only way a mass public can be reached and informed about any topic in the political world.

There is still a lot the media does today in playing their public watchdog role, if you think about Watergate or the recent revealing of the 'Schwarzgeldaffäre'³² in Germany. But it is definitely clear that this is not the time to rest on ones laurels. The media-political relationship is in a bad condition.

²⁹ Street 2001, p. 198

³⁰ Curran 2000, p. 129

³¹ Tännsjö 1985, p. 559

³² in 1999 Germany's media, led by the Süddeutsche Zeitung, revealed the existence of illegal bank accounts used for party financing of the CDU, the conservative party. This finally resulted in the resignation of the party's chairman and led to an unprecedented loss of confidence in politicians among the public.

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