



British Middle East Center
for Studies and Research

Democracy & The Media

Do today's media fulfil their role in a democracy?

Author: Hamed Fazeli

British Middle East Center for Studies & Research
Copyright © 2012, British Middle-East Center for Studies & Research, All rights reserved



The role of the news media in a democracy is to provide information to enable the citizens to make informed choices. Does today's media fulfil this role?

"It's hard to believe that in the greatest democracy in the world, we need legislation to prevent the government from writing and paying for the news." — Senator Kerry (**Think Exist, nd**)

The media is fundamentally perceived as either the entertainer of the public or the stoolpigeon of politics. It is in essence, the backbone of a democracy. As this informant of politics, its basic role is to supply the public with information that will essentially be used to vote for whichever party the voter favours. It recognises concerns and issues and so functions and acts as the mediator for discussion and debate between that of the public and those who aim to resolve these issues, the politicians. The media also serves as the watchdog, the one that is given the role of notifying and exposing any faults and misconducts by those who have power in society, in the case of a democracy, again, these would be the politicians. It is safe to assume then, that the media respects the aforementioned key roles in this vast system that is democracy, or at least the notion that it does or should. (**Skogerbo, 1996. Kellner, 2004. Venturelli, 1998. McQuail, 1993.**)

When we look at whether the media actually fulfils this role we get quite a different picture. Gurevitch and Blumer (**1990**) claimed that the central and foremost functions of the media in a democracy were to shadow socio-political decisions and developments, recognise appropriate problems and concerns, hold to account officials for their approach to power and the manner in which they exercise it, offer the public with incentives to learn about and develop more interest in the political process, and above all, to counter and resist any sort of effort to influence or sway the media to subvert their independence.

However with the recent Leveson Inquiry, we saw the state wanting to regulate the press themselves through statutory regulation (**Wintour, 2012**). When David Cameron gave his decision, that the press should be given a short time to come up with a new self-regulating body to replace the Press Complaints Commission (**The Guardian, 2012**), he found himself confronted by many members of the parliament (**The Guardian, 2012**). It seems bizarre that members of a parliament of a country that establishes itself upon liberation and freedom, especially that of speech, would want a statutory regulating body for the press? This will directly oppose the issue of having no influence on the press, as you will then have the parliament creating laws that will basically either prevent or encourage certain stories to be highlighted within the press, whether this be directly after the body is created or in the future.

However even with or without state regulation one can argue that the press no longer abides by these roles as explained by Gurevitch and Blumer, rather with the current press, their main objective is not to inform the public but to essentially make a profit. And we see this through the increasing number of adverts appearing in newspapers and magazines day by day (**World Association of Newspapers, 2006**).



Even when we are to look at other sources of news or media as a whole we see critics claiming that multinational corporations are actually governing and directing the commercial mass media, making the media an antidemocratic figure supporting the way things stand as they are now (Kellner, 2004. Herman and Chomsky, 1988. Herman and McChesney, 1997). The role of the news media specifically has become more of an entertaining role rather than one of informing. It supplies stories of gossip, sex, and scandal. Political stories and reports have become more or less about the personalities of individuals rather than their actual policies and ideologies. In the lack of producing this platform for debate, the news media has failed the voters and has left them with political propaganda, holding only pointless and futile slogans and so ultimately producing this nation of disinterested citizens who are very sceptical and unconvinced by politics (Bennett and Entman, 2001. Barnett, 2002). The news media has also been ‘barking up the wrong tree’ as this watchdog that it was thought to be. They hunt for scandals and stories of gossip in the private lives of politicians and their families, while ignoring more serious issues regarding their actual policies. As Sabato (1991) put it, they go after weak politicians like sharks in a feeding frenzy. It has become a habit of the media to frighten us with the over exaggeration of minor concerns, while serious problems are overlooked or simply pushed off the agenda (Glassner, 1999). This overemphasis then leads to exaggerated panic by the mass and so needless processes are taken and even new legislation is created, a “gonzo Justice” (Altheide, 1995, 2002. Altheide and Michalowski, 1999).

Instead of the media informing, we find it entertaining, or in more stern words, dumbing down the population. We have the media acting as a socialising mechanism. In other words, parenting children. A simple example of this can be shown through advertisement. When we see adverts trying to sell toys for children we find that the toys are usually aimed at a certain gender. For instance the boy is shown with an action figure, or a racing car, while the girl is presented with a baby doll or a kitchen set. These can be seen as process of socialisation, getting the children to abide by patriarchy. The girl is presented with her future role as the house wife, while the boy as the macho figure.

The media as a news source plays an enormous role in guiding the nation by swaying them to whatever opinion the State wants them to have. Steven Luke describes this as the third dimension of power. In this form of exercising power, the State shapes people’s preferences by determining their very wants (Luke, 2005). For instance when we look at the Soviet Union during the World Wars and the Cold War, we see that the United States was on an on and off relationship with them. One minute they are at each other’s throats and the next they are best buddies. How did the United States manage to convince its people to go to war against the Soviet Union after just coming out of a war where they were allies? Put simply, it was through the media. During and leading up to the Cold War, there was huge propaganda against both communism and the Soviet Union. Movies were being released, stories were being written, newspapers were reporting, all of which was anti-communist material. It was through this that the US managed to get the support of its citizens to back up their war against communism and the Soviet Union. It is through this example that we can see how Luke’s



theory on power is put into practise. The United States changed and shaped the population's likings and feelings towards another State simply through the use of the media.

If we also look at the events that took place in East Timor and Cambodia we see that the news media again failed to report of what was actually taking place there. In East Timor the US press and news did not mention the fact that their government was supplying the weapons fuelling the invasion of East Timor by Indonesia. It was simply kept off the radar. Nor was there a whole host of coverage of the invasion itself. We see here that if the news media's role is truly to inform the public, it was failing to do so. This was a crime against humanity, one which was supported by the United States, however the news failed to report on this miscarriage of power and so the public was oblivious to this wanton side of their politicians, which ultimately affected their view of their government and so essentially influencing their decisions on who to vote for, directly affecting their democracy. The same happened in Cambodia, where the United States invaded the country, killed thousands of innocent people, but the press only decided to report on it once they left and Vietnam decided to invade Cambodia. The press then blamed all the deaths on the second invasion and said absolutely nothing about the United States' intervention (**Herman and Chomsky, 1988**)

To conclude, commercial mass media is keeping people in a state of low knowledge by changing from this stoolpigeon of politics to one of entertainment and simple stories, or in some cases no stories. A democracy is only to be achieved once the voter is informed and educated to the extent where they are capable of understanding key political issues. But, evidently, the mass media is not adept of fulfilling this role properly. Many commentators of the media and the news claim that the media is simply providing the public with what they want, and that is entertainment. This notion, however, disregards the fact that the media can and has always shaped and moulded people's preferences. By only providing entertainment, one has no option but to like it. And whether the people want to be informed or not is not an issue for the media to decide. The media, news and press specifically, should not give any thought to what the people want, rather give them what they need. There is enough indication that shows people can be taught to appreciate serious news (**Gunther and Mughan, 2000: 440**).

