



New Media, Politics and Social Movements

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Abstract

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda. The paper seeks to highlight on the importance of New Media in contemporary politics and social movements of the world. It discusses how with the help of New Media political action is made easier, faster and more universal.

Keywords: Media, Internet, Digital Media, Politics, Social Movements

From the early beginnings of democratic thought in the eighteenth century, political philosophers have recognized the crucial role of un-inhibited public debate and free speech, which later extended to the demand for a free press (Keane, 1991). Several arguments have been brought to justify freedom of the press, the most common idea being that the media provide for a free 'marketplace of ideas' where contradicting voices compete for public recognition without the interference of the state. The notion of a 'marketplace of ideas' is based on the liberal belief that no single agency be allowed to have the last say on the course of politics. Rather, it is through public exchange of argument and counter-argument that the 'truth' eventually emerges (Mill, 1859 reprinted 1974). From the perspective of the 'marketplace of ideas' argument, the media are usually assigned a more passive role, serving as a forum where a variety of groups and individuals are given the opportunity to express their views. In many respects the situation in new democracies appears quite similar to the struggle for an autonomous public sphere in the eighteenth century. In order to encourage the development of a vivid civil society and to overcome the autocratic dominance of political elites, it is of crucial importance that alternative views have access to the forum of the media, regardless of the validity of their truth claims (Voltmer, 2006).z

The theory of the public sphere, developed by Jurgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* (1981), emphasizes the role of communication in public opinion. He argues that the public sphere is 'a realm of our social life in which something approaching a public opinion can be formed', neither institutionally controlled nor dominated by private interests, as a necessary requirement for a well-functioning democracy. Rational and critical discussion between ordinary citizens on public matters is essential to the public sphere, and today the media provides the primary spaces for such discussion. Newspapers, radio, television, and the Internet, all manipulated the abilities of citizens' engagement in the public sphere on different communicative levels (Lopes, 2014).

From the core countries of the global economy to the emerging democracies of the former 'second' and 'third' worlds, from the top ranks of government and business to the grassroots networks of civil society, political communication is being transformed by global processes of liberalization and deregulation and by the diffusion of new media technologies. Intensifying and unleashing forces of media commercialization and conglomeration, these processes are giving rise to a series of general tendencies at the level of national politics – altering the ways in which social actors and issues are represented in the mass media, the ways in which political actors attempt to communicate with one another as well as with potential supporters, and, as a result, the very forms of those organisations, such as political parties, interest groups and social movements, which have long shaped modern political processes (Moog & Beltrao, 2001).

In country after country, competing national broadcasters merge information and entertainment formats in pursuit of ever more elusive audience shares, they are increasingly subordinating political coverage to the imperatives of speed and spectacle, heightening the projection of personality and image over issues and idea. In their attempts to adapt to this media climate, individual as well as collective actors are coming to rely on professional image-management techniques and apparatuses, as political negotiation, competition and appeal – even within government, party or movement organisations – become increasingly 'mediatized'.

The diffusion of the neo-liberal paradigm and the wave of new media technologies – have precipitated a transformation of national communication systems in nation after nation around the world. Private, commercial television has now appeared in national broadcasting configurations formerly subordinated to strict regulation and managed by the state by political parties, or by public service organisations. Remaining state or public channels have been increasingly subjected to market pressures, forced to depend more and more on advertising revenues as licensing fees and other state subsidies have dwindled, their programming evaluated increasingly in terms of audience share rather than by traditional measures of quality.

In addition, long standing regulations meant to assure that television would both serve an educational role for citizens and provide a level playing field for political actors have begun to dismantle in many nations.

This transformation of national broadcasting systems has had profound implications for the form and content of political communication in many countries. As their broadcasting systems approach more fully commercialized configurations – in terms of ownership structure, sources of financing and rules and norms for programming content – this has begun to transform the ways in which political topics are presented to audiences in news and information broadcasts, as well as the ways in which politicians attempt to present themselves to their citizen-audiences. Hence, within the mass media, television has come to play a central role, quickly replacing both radio and the written press as the leading source of entertainment and information for the majority of people in both the most advanced and the emerging nations. Politicians have come to realize that if they want to reach the citizenry, they must do so primarily through television. As Manuel Castells points out, in contemporary democracies, the electronic media have become the ‘privileged space of politics’. And within that space, television reigns supreme (Moog & Beltrao , 2001).

However, as political actors are becoming more and more dependent on television as a means of communication, national broadcasting systems are being transformed by the expansion of commercial television. As a result, political coverage increasingly is coming to be dominated by ‘commercial media logic’. Political actors, in turn are learning to tailor their communicative efforts according to the dictates of this new commercial logic. They are learning to supply the kinds of issues and images that will assure them airtime (Moog & Beltrao , 2001).

Communication is the sharing of meaning through the exchange of information. The process of communication is defined by the technology of communication, the characteristic of the senders and receivers of information, their cultural codes of reference and protocols of communication, and the scope of the communication process. Meaning can only be understood in the context of the social relationships in which information and communication are processed.

To understand the scope of this process, interpersonal communication must be differentiated from societal communication. In the former, the designated sender(s) and receiver(s) are the subjects of communication. In the latter, the content of communication has the potential to be diffused to society at large: usually called mass communication. Interpersonal communication is interactive (the message is sent from one to one with feedback loops), while mass communication can be interactive or one-directional. Traditional mass communication is one-directional (the message is sent from one to many, as with books, newspapers, films, radio, and television). Indeed, some forms of interactivity can be accommodated in mass communication

via other means of communication. For example, viewers can comment on talk radio or television programs by calling in, writing letters, and sending e-mails. Yet, mass communication used to be predominantly one-directional. However, with the diffusion of the Internet, a new form of interactive communication has emerged, characterized by the capacity of sending messages from many to many, in real time or chosen time, and with the possibility of using point-to-point communication, narrowcasting or broadcasting, depending on the purpose and characteristics of the intended communication practice (Castells, Communication power, 2013).

Manuel Castells calls this historically new form of communication *mass self-communication*. He asserts, it is mass communication because it can potentially reach a global audience, as in the posting of a video on YouTube, a blog with RSS links to a number of web sources or a message to a massive-email list. At the same time, it is self-communication because the production of the message is self-generated, the definition of the potential receiver(s) is self-directed, and the retrieval of specific messages or content from World Wide Web and electronic communication networks is self-selected. The three forms of communication (interpersonal, mass communication, and mass self-communication) coexist, interact, and complement each other rather than substituting for one another. These various dimension constitute a system, and one transformation cannot be understood without the others. Rice et al. (1984) identified this as the emergence of new media through the interaction of technological change and communication.

Media, and digital media, are an autonomous subsystem, a transmission belt between citizens and elites in the political process. ‘Citizens’ provide aggregate inputs into this process, but it would be equally appropriate to use the labels ‘people’, ‘civil society’ or ‘publics’. To understand the media and politics, the public (or publics) can be counterpoised to political elites (which include civic activists and also economic elites insofar as they are politically relevant actors). Media elites translate the agenda of political elites, plus ‘people’, into the media agenda. These political elites consist not just of powerful leaders, as Schudson (2011) has pointed out, for the vast bulk of sources of news are government

officials. But elites that rule must also set and be responsive to the agendas of the public. And apart from this responsiveness on which the legitimacy of ruling elites is based, there are counter publics (Fraser, 1990), publics that challenge the status quo via media (Schroeder, 2018).

The measure of political change is the responsiveness of the political apparatus to citizens, mainly via the media as a transmission belt. For politics, only politically relevant communication and information should be considered, and the yardstick for this is whether they provide a representative and plural set of inputs into the political apparatus. In a democratic society, these inputs should not, as much as possible, be skewed towards powerful elites or towards particularly powerful groups since they should be representative (Dahl, 1998). However, the yardstick of responsiveness can also be applied to non-democratic China, though in this case there is a single, all-powerful elite (the party), which exercises strong control over the media agenda, and publics of counter-publics are kept within bounds.

At this background 'communication' can be briefly define as compromising two-way one-to-one or one-to-many messages, whereas 'information' means the one-way obtaining of knowledge or data that makes a difference between the two. 'Media' encompass both information and communication. The media constitute the transmission belt of political responsiveness and politically relevant inputs with the separation of the political system from the economic and cultural systems. This separation is not controversial in mainstream political and social theory, and makes sense of the idea that media systems have become autonomous from market forces and from the political system.

Media are a 'subsystem', the transmission belt within the political system; their autonomy is from the public, from elites and from the political apparatus – but media serve to promote (or not) political change. This is why, although Williams and Delli Carpini (2011), among others, have pointed out that what is considered 'political' has widened with digital media beyond what it was with traditional media, they also say that it is nevertheless still important to delimit what falls within politically relevant media.

However, even if much of political communication and information is moving online, it is worth bearing in mind that the vast bulk of political responsiveness and inputs still take place via traditional media, newspapers and television, rather than through new digital media. Chadwick (2013) argues that politics and the media (in the United States and the United Kingdom) are currently in a 'hybrid' transition from old to new: he says there is a 'hybrid media system' that 'exhibits a balance between the older logics of transmission and reception and the newer logics of circulation, recirculation, and negotiation', with the balance still skewed towards the older logics. He concludes (for the United States) that 'political communication...is more polycentric than during the period of mass communication that dominated the twentieth century...the opportunities for ordinary citizens...are on balance greater than they were...[though it] is primarily political activists and the politically interested who are able to make a difference with newer media'. This over looks, first, the way in which political and media elites (not just 'ordinary citizens') are also able to make more powerful uses of new media to monitor and respond to the public; and second that new media change not just those who are active and interested in politics, but can also shift attention and the agenda to new political forces, including political 'outsider', who can use new media to circumvent traditional ones (Schroeder, 2018).

The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behaviour that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society. In a world of concentrated wealth and major conflicts of class interest, to fulfil this role requires systematic propaganda.

In countries where the levers of power are in the hands of a state bureaucracy, the monopolistic control over the media, often supplemented by official censorship, makes it clear that the media, serve the ends of a dominant elite. It is much more difficult to see a propaganda system at work where the media are private and formal censorship is absent. This is especially true where the media activity compete, periodically attack and exposes corporate and governmental malfeasance, and the general community interest. Anything that is not evident (and remains undiscussed in the media) is the limited nature of such critiques, and its effect both on access to a private media system and on its behaviour and performance (Herman & Chomsky, 1988)

The mass media serve as the main link between governments, political parties, candidates, etc, and voters, as the opportunities for direct communication between citizens and their representatives are extremely limited both in terms of the scale of the audience reached and the scope of the issues covered. However, the media are not just channels conveying the messages politician wants them to communicate to voters. They are also active participants in the creation of political messages.

The enormous growth of the Internet since the mid-nineties has placed debate about the potential consequences of this new media on the political process, on the top of the research agenda. Research shows that people who are politically active on the web were already 'political junkies'. However, the participation in politics has been facilitated. Political action is made easier, faster and more universal by the new developments. ICTs lower the cost and obstacles of organising collective action significantly. Bimber (1998) argues that this will be particularly beneficial for those groups

outside the boundaries of traditional public institutions or political organisations. These new, more citizen- based groups that cannot depend on formal support or funding will benefit relatively more from the internet than for instance political parties of labour movements (Aelst & Walgrave, 2003).

However, we are not so much concern with these aspects here; there is another aspect with which we are more concern. It is how the civil society, political parties and specific interest groups attempt to make use of media. This is by far most important aspect to make use of media and politics today. Since the field is vast, we can only observe that there are different contemporary instances of social movements making use of the power of media. Among the famous cases are the cases of Arab Spring which referred to the democratic uprising that arose independently and spread across the Arab world in 2011. The Arab Spring, which broke out across parts of the Middle East and North Africa in 2010, took the world by storm. Entrenched dictators who had oppressed their citizens for decades suddenly were under siege, and a few were removed from power in a democratic wave that (at least temporarily) hit the region. These uprisings were originally greeted with great optimism throughout the world, yet what is relearned from Arab Spring is that democracy is not an easy thing to accomplish. To the contrary, in some cases protest had led to the revival of extremist Islamic groups striving to grasp political power, the transfer of political power from one authoritarian form of government to another, or protracted civil war, as the case in Syria. The long- term outcomes of the Arab Spring revolutions are uncertain, but what is clear is that new media platforms played a significant role (albeit complementary to traditional methods) in the planning and mobilization efforts that brought people onto the streets and posed serious challenges to existing political systems (Carty , 2018).

Occupy movement in US is partly inspired by the Arab Spring on September 17, 2011, approximately 1,000 protestors descended on New York's Zuccotti Park, located at the mouth of the famous financial center known as Wall Street. Occupy Wall Street – OWS as it is commonly abbreviated – was initiated by activists associated with the “culturejamming headquarters” Adbusters (adbusters.org). The plan was to stage a long-term protest of prevalent social and economic injustices such as income inequality, corporate influence on politics, and unregulated business practices. A contingent of protestors stayed in Zuccotti Park full time – sleeping, eating, meeting, marching, and organizing – to draw consistent attention to the financial practices protestors argued were detrimental to social welfare and individual prosperity (Milner, 2013). Similar to most contemporary social movements, OWS activists organized using digital technologies that allowed them to circumvent professional experts, charismatic leaders, or formal SMO's. Instead, as stated by Carty (2018), they shared grievances and planning strategies in a horizontal fashion through new media to quickly and cheaply get the word out about their campaign and reach a critical mass. The OWS social movement was made up of an assortment of activists. Many were young, many had been foreclosed upon, and many were unemployed or underemployed. Though left-leaning, they were not officially associated with any political party yet shared a concern for the current economic and political predicament in the United States.

However, there are better examples in India one is the famous movement for Jan Lokpal Bill where media played a crucial role in mobilizing the movement. As pointed before there are few media monopolies. One such monopoly is the Star Group which took interest in the West Bengal assembly election in 2011. About a couple of years before 2011 Star Group collaborated with Ananda Bazar Group and set a company television channel called Star Anand. This group gave all out support to the then leader of opposition Miss Mamata Banerjee where she owned the election after defeating the left front government. Subsequently, later the partnership between Star Group and Anand Group was no longer needed. The Star Group had one agenda of removing the left front government, which it saw as obstructing the entry of foreign capital and steps towards free market economy.

And similar to the case in 2014, all the major media houses in India particularly the zee network backed the BJP Prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi. It is of course difficult to say whether both Mamata Banerjee and Narendra Modi would have owned with handsome margins without the support of media or not. But the fact remains that there was strong media support for both the winners.

The movements to which we have already referred like Arab Spring, Occupy Movement, Jan Lokpal Bill such role of media was quite evident. Manuel Castells states that historically, social movement has been dependent on the existence of specific communication mechanisms: rumors, sermons, pamphlets, and manifestos, spread from person to person, from the pulpit, from the press, or by whatever means of communication were available. And, in the contemporary time, multimodal, digital networks of horizontal communication are the fastest and most autonomous, interactive, reprogrammable and self-expanding means of communication processes between individuals engaged in the social movement determine the organizational characteristics of the social movement itself: the more interactive and self-configurable communication is, the less hierarchical is the organization and the more participatory is the movement. Therefore, he states this is why the networked social movements of the digital age represent a new species of social movement (Castells , 2012).

Castells states that, the first networked social movements spread in the Arab world and were confronted with murderous violence by Arab dictatorships. They experienced diverse fates, from victory to concessions to repeated massacres to

civil wars. In the United States, the Occupy Wall Street movement, was also networked in cyberspace and became the event of the year. And the motto of the 99 percent, whose well-being had been sacrificed to the interest of the 1 percent, who control 23 percent of the country's wealth, became a mainstream topic in American political life. In these two cases along with the other networked social movements that have existed ignored political parties, distrusted the media, did not recognize any leadership and rejected all formal organization, relying on the internet and local assemblies for collective debate and decision-making.

In the contemporary world where the media houses are controlled by the corporates and political parties New Media attempts to assist people in mobilizing them into a successful mass movement. Therefore, it is quite clear that social movements including the political ones can make use of different types of New Media in their favour to achieve their desirable demands safeguarding the rights towards democracy.

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