Media and Politics: Which is Controlling Which?

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Abstract

The communication of political information is an important process in the political system, and media play a decisive role in this activity. There is extensive debate in academia about the impact of media on politics, and also the influence politicians usually have on different media platforms to guide the masses towards certain directions and actions. Some theorists believe that the mass media facilitate democracy by allowing a wide variety of views to be expressed. Some believe that the media are anti-democratic because of their power to manipulate the way people think about politics at home and abroad, and that the manipulation is usually exercised by people in power assuming that politicians are the hidden "institutions" behind media products. This article provides a review of recent debates in the field from both parties.

Key words: media; politics; control; information; influence; manipulation.

1. Introduction

'Media' is a term which takes a lot upon itself these days. Apparently, the term seems to carry profound meanings and complications which accept a variety of definitions, hypotheses and, indeed, ideologies instead of simply perceiving it as the different communication channels through which news, data, entertainment, education, or promotional messages are disseminated. Media is more complicated than it might seem. In the last few years, the mass media have helped to fundamentally alter the nature of politics in the majority of the Arab countries. Among the most important political events since 2011 is the so-called 'Arab Spring'. Media have played a remarkable role in the various unprecedented occurrences in the Arab world since 2011 to date. Media are affected by the constraints of legal and informal political pressures, as well as by the economic forces that shape the media industry. However, the media's impact on the political world is real and undeniable. It is strange how media can convince people to adopt a certain set of political beliefs. Thus, it can be said that the media are talented actors who, within the traditional structural constraints, influence the political world in a variety of ways. This influence reaches not only political elites but also ordinary citizens. What is happening in the Arab world nowadays can be taken as a vivid example of how ordinary citizens, illiterate ones maybe, are becoming 'politicians' or 'journalists' who excessively discuss the different political events presented by media. The media industry, most directly, is a powerful lobbyist for its interests. If we take voting as an example here, we can state with much confidence that media corporations are major contributors to political campaigns. They have also organized themselves into specialized lobbying groups that represent the interests of different

segments of the media industry. However, politics is more than just voting, and the political impact emanates from more than just the news media. Therefore, considering the media's impact on the political implications of movies, entertainment television, music and the new media seems necessary to fully understand the control mechanism between the two.

The question of whether the news media affect voting behavior is a researchers' favorite question. Yet, the most profound and direct influence of media on the political world probably takes place at the level of political elites and not ordinary citizens. The media's influence on a hundred politicians has much more significant and pronounced implications than their influence on a hundred regular voters.

Social media are also playing an enormous role in shaping the political scene. The advent of the Internet has generated huge interest about whether Social Media have any impact on the political sphere. There seems an agreement on the fact that the Internet has created new channels of communication that have dramatically changed the flow of information compared with the known traditional media. Social Media play a key role in spreading news among the masses. This paper tries to explore how media, social media in particular, help in increasing political knowledge and engagement. In this context, we address first, the relation between media and politics in an attempt to answer one of the most complicated and debatable questions in the field: Which is controlling which? Do media, with all their forms, shape the political scene? Or, does politics, politicians and people in power to be more precise, control media institutions? Finally, we provide evidence for the influence of Media on politics, by looking at how the spreading of information usually mobilizes the masses.

2. Media's Influence on Politics

Apparently, researchers have had great difficulty clearly measuring media effects because media stimuli routinely interact with other social stimuli, and the reaction of people to media stimuli differs from one person to another. As a result, clear evidence of direct media influence on people's political beliefs and attitudes is difficult to obtain. Still, the influence is there; some recent researches seem to point toward a dual concern with the power of audiences to interpret media and with the subtler influences of media. Media influences remain subtler, stronger, deeper, and clearer.Media influence is strong especially in the early political socialization of adolescents, who are apparently old enough to seriously consider political issues but have not yet fully developed a political orientation.[1] This does not necessarily mean that media influence is exclusive to this category of people, but it simply means that adolescents are more likely to be influenced by the different media messages due to their age. According to Garber (2008), the majority of high school students rely on the mass media more than on families, teachers, or friends in developing their political attitudes about current or past events. And this runs counter to the "two step flow" model of influence, which sees personal interaction as influential as media exposure (29). [2] Research on the media's impact on citizens highlights the tension between media influence and reader agency. Media messages are negotiated by readers, but these messages have an impact on them, whether they know it or not. Media influence what people think about and, to a lesser extent, how they understand the world in general and the political world in particular. When we say that media influence what people think about , we cannot, for sure, measure the extent to which media can influence people; still, the impact media may leave on educated people is assuredly not the same when we tackle illiterate, uneducated people.

However, we should state that the influence of media is neither blatant nor unqualified. Perhaps the most significant and powerful effects of media exposure come about after long-term heavy use. It is very onerous to deny the fact that readers of media messages usually come with a preexisting set of beliefs and experiences through which they filter media messages, and that is why media influence differs from one person to another, because their preexisting beliefs and experiences differ as well.

Readers of media messages also occupy specific social positions that affect how they interpret the media. To understand the impact of media on the political beliefs of an individual, therefore, we must always remember that media consumption is often an active process. Media readers are not passive viewers who easily absorb the various media words and images, but they are active interpreters who strive to be convinced. However, Media are too powerful to be resisted (Garbner et al., 80-94).

Till now, media effects on political elites and individual citizens have been discussed without paying much attention to media in their complex relationship with social movements. Social movements, groups of citizens who have banded together to promote a social or political cause, are an especially important part of the political landscape because they can mediate between individual citizens and political elites.

It should be noted here that, social movements, too, have tried to use some of the new media forms or technologies. Since social movements have often been shut out of mainstream media, they have used the internet and the new media extensively to post information, promote their causes, and solicit new members. The political and the social Moroccan movement "20 February", for example, has used the internet and the different new media forms, especially Facebook, to post the necessary information, objectives, and details about the movement.

Thus, it can be said that new media are playing an unquestionable role in the political world. it is true that it is very difficult to measure the extent to which

new media can influence the political beliefs of a citizen, and it is also true that, as Barnett puts it, " there is no evidence that increasing exploitation of new media by campaigning and pressure groups has actually brought more people into the political fold" (211). But, the writer seems to fully grasp the importance of new media in the political world or in the political culture as he prefers to label it. Barnett states that "leaving the political culture to new communicative devices is a dangerous challenge" (213). It is apparently a dangerous challenge due to new media's ability to change the whole dominant political culture from one of alienation, and detachment to one of concerned involvement.

If we take Egypt as an example, we can clearly see the political significance in the Egyptian media. Politics, shaping or even distorting citizens' political beliefs, is potently present on the developing, mostly non-democratic, countries' media. The Egyptian media after Abdelfatah Sisi has become a president of the country is certainly not the same as it was before. Media are striving to convince all the Egyptians to become pro-Sisi citizens. The Egyptian media have lost its credibility due to their biased attitudes in the political battles during Abdelfatah Sisi's campaign. All the programs, especially the so-called entertainment media, have clearly tackled politics, and have strongly tried to shape the Egyptians' political beliefs.

Television programs are just as political when they avoid serious political issues such as corporate corruption. In Morocco, for instance, issues of corruption are seldom discussed by the Moroccan media. Still, according to Gitlin (2000) a word of caution is in order when we are discussing the political role of entertainment media. There is no clear conspiracy to "distort" viewers' political beliefs. But, programming decisions are usually made on the basis of trying to satisfy the "tastes" of the public, while meeting the needs of advertisers indeed (13- 24). Obviously, we should always remember that commercial media are "a for-profit" enterprise and creating entertainment that does not contradict this

capitalist agenda is television's major form of political proselytizing. For sure, ratings and profits are the bottom line.

The political impact of media, especially television, is highly complicated. The content of media does matter; however, we should never forget that audiences play an important role in interpreting what they see. They are active and not passive viewers as Croteau and Hoynes (2003) strongly argue. While the political messages in the entertainment media may be ambiguous, some argue that they generally have conservative implications.[3]

Movies, a great source of entertainment, often send political messages in a hidden way. Stephan Prince (1992) seriously tried to study the different political messages existing in movies. He argues that films are more likely to reinforce dominant political views than promote alternatives for change. Even popular science fiction films, romantic films, horror films, etc. do not, accordingly, offer any political alternatives, but they simply send certain planned political messages to reinforce the dominant political views. For Prince, "films can be viewed as reinforcing existing trends toward political passivity and feelings of social helplessness in the face of economic crisis" (193).

Entertainment media are vast and powerful in their impacts due to their variety. The world of music for instance has also its own set of political implications. Like television and movies, music is generally a commercial product which is sold for profit. Some may strongly argue that music, all music according to them, is about love. Still, we can state that music may not contain overt political messages, but some forms of music attract a precise audience because they promote politically charged, alternative, or controversial views. Such music is especially politically significant because it tends to be much more meaningful and valuable to people who often listen to it as it is the case with Nass Elghiwan's music for instance.

Gottediener (1980) states that an ongoing interactive process is involved in the production and consumption of media products. The producers of music, usually

the corporate owners and not necessarily the bands, are often interested in the creation of profit. In more theoretical terms, what is important to producers is the "exchange value" (23) of the product; what it can be sold for. People who buy music have a totally different motivation; they want music to simply enjoy the music. What is important for them is, obviously, the "use value" (24) of the product, the function it apparently serves.

In addition to the two previous values, the exchange value and the use value, discussed by Gottdiener, the writer sees that music has a third value which is "the sign value" (26). The sign value is, accordingly, the symbolic meaning people who buy music usually infuse the product with. This value seems to be more significant. Saying that you regularly listen to Nancy Ajram's music, for instance, is not the same as Nass Elghiwan's music, and Elissa's music is certainly not the same as Sami Yussef's or Maher Zain's Music. The music, we usually listen to, often suggests something significant that goes beyond a difference in musical tastes. Music listeners or fans usually infuse the music they like with meaning by associating music they prefer with an outlook on life. Musical taste can also signal a political orientation or a set of values. That is why for example you hear people saying "I will no longer listen to Assala's music because she is against Bashar Al Asad" or you hear the opposite.

Gottdiener strongly argues that often the meaning that is attached to music has political significance. But, accordingly, even in this case, the industry music is subtle enough to adeptly manipulate articulations of dissent into valuable product. The music industry has accurately learned how to make of any music product a profitable commercial one. Let us take Elhussein Eljasmi's successful song "Bouchrit Khir". The song is fully political since it encourages Egyptians to go and vote, to choose a new president and to guarantee a better future for Egypt. Pro-Mourssi's have insulted Eljasmi for the song claiming that Egypt already had a president who was Mahmoud Mourssi, while pro-Sisi's accepted the song with much pride and happiness. The political significance touched on

in Eljasmi's song is very revealing. The fact that the United Arab Emirates have clearly supported Sisi's campaign seems to be related with the fact that Sisi's chosen song for his campaign has been sung by an Emirati singer. Music, here, seems to be at the core of politics, and politics seems to be using every possible and influential type of the so-called entertainment media.

The media's influence on the political process has, obviously, transformed the way politics is conducted in many countries. It reaches beyond the content of political coverage in the news entertainment media. Politics are no more exclusive for politicians or politics elites but due to media all people are speaking politics nowadays. The media have facilitated the development of mass audience for political spectacles. This audience has usually no serious and clear affiliation with political parties or simply politics. Media's influence, as we have noted above, extends into the social process of political deliberation, and transforms the physical, social act of conducting politics; it goes beyond media coverage of news and entertainment.

3. The Influence of Politics on Media

We have discussed the influence of media on politics and politicians, but what about the influence of politics on media? Can media ownership be translated into undue political influence? In other words, how might media ownership translate into political power? Well, it is possible that the different builders of media empires can use "their" media to promote a very specific political agenda; when media owners and sponsors become candidates, media messages and media language generally change to serve the owners. In Italy, for instance, the fact that Silvio Berlusconi owns several television networks was of great help to make of him the most visible political figure.

The situation in the Arab world is even more complex. The vast size of media industry in the different Arabic nations does not tell any stories of freedom or

independence but of manipulation and interests. The owners of media, usually politicians, in the region often have direct control over media products and thus are able to exert political influence by promoting ideas that enhance their interests and serve their power. The situation seems to be scaring and ridiculous at the same time; each party has a newspaper, each politician has a network, and each king or president has a TV channel. These media systems are used as tools to speak their thoughts out and to influence the viewers. The influence is always guaranteed due to repetition and media over consumption.

This concept of media objectivity in the Arab world remains debatable. The so-called independent media may give hope; still, to what extent can we really perceive independent media in the Arab world as being really and fully independent? It might not seem really appropriate to deny that some media rely on a perception of objectivity to maintain their legitimacy. However, in non-democratic countries, even legitimacy has other meanings than the ones we usually think of or believe in.

The process of using media to promote a political agenda is more complex than simply feeding people ideas and images that they passively accept. Using media contains various subtle processes that lead to serious political consequences; the use of media may lead to total change in one's political beliefs, and may lead to a construction of new political identities. The changes in the political beliefs are not to be taken as something perfunctory; the fact that Arab women, for example, believe in sex as a way of resistance in Syria is shockingly unprecedented, or that Arab women believe in nudity, the "Femen" movement, as an influential tool to get their rights remains also debatable. These deeds, according to many, stem from media.

Ownership by major corporations of vast portfolios of mass media gives us reason to believe that a whole range of images and ideas will rarely be visible. To put it in clearer terms, some ideas and images will be widely available, while others will be largely excluded.[4] In the mainstream media in the Arab world, for

example, images of naked women are often connected with richness, modernity, and high education, while veiled women are often represented as uneducated, traditional, and awfully poor. These images with time influence the audience in general, and women in particular.

It would be wise to state that government regulations play a very significant role in shaping the environment within which media organizations operate. Still, the constraints of government regulation do not determine what media organization will do. Instead, the media sometimes challenge, interpret or simply ignore regulations. For example, according to the government regulation, Morocco is an Islamic country, and the different Islamic teachings should be both respected and reflected on media! Is it really the case? The well-distributed images of nudity may take care of answering this question.

Apparently, passing laws is one thing, and enforcing them is totally another, especially in countries like Morocco. Besides, government regulations are usually subject to interpretation, giving media organizations the power to read regulations in ways that match their broader agendas. Still, a fact should be powerfully stressed here, government regulations are ignored in totalitarian nations because ignoring those regulations serve the government somehow; scenes or images of nudity, sexuality and even heterosexuality do not harm the dominating forces in any possible way. However, ignoring the regulations that might threaten the interests of the powerful groups is not even an option in totalitarian societies.

Media and politics remain two vast issues to be fully grasped and discussed. The relationship between media and politics seems to be doomed to complexity. Media are powerful enough to change people's political opinions about a candidate; they are strong systems that might shape a citizen's political stance, belief, and orientation. By so-doing, a political identity emerges. It goes without saying that media have made of politics an issue available to all, media readers, even in non-democratic countries, are discussing politics. However, as it has

been widely discussed and stated, politics and politicians may subtly influence media to achieve their objectives either by media ownership or by financial support. In the two cases, the objective is united: the citizen. Influencing the citizen, convincing him/her to adopt certain political beliefs, to vote, or to act in a planned dictated way is usually achieved due to media's subtle ways.

4. Social Media Mobilizing The Street

The Internet is considered a useful instrument for connecting transnational social movements and protest events. According to Tarrow (2005), the Internet facilitates coordination between political groups, shifts political aims from a local to a transnational dimension, and links struggles worldwide. Scholars have paid attention to how the Internet supports social movements in creating independent and powerful channels of communication. The Internet then may also facilitate the coordination in political communities. Blumler and Coleman (2009) include the bottom-up flow of communication generated by social movements in their category of 'E-Democracy from below'. With this, the authors refer to various forms of grassroots collective action for which the Internet offers autonomous communication channels 'to interact beyond, around and across institutionally controlled communication channels' (117).

A good example of the efficiency of the internet in social movements has been the role that Social Media played in supporting and coordinating protests during the Arab Spring.[5] In a context where freedom of expression and access to neutral and accountable media channels is considered limited, Social Media became the main source of information, and a factor behind social mobilization in various communities. This is because information spread via Social Media is usually quickly absorbed by the masses who become themselves "opinion leaders"; they deliver and interpret media messages to the offline population. Tunisia and

Egypt are not the only existing countries in the scene, the Iranian government seems to exercise an excessive control over the Internet as well in a desperate attempt to control the masses. Strategies like intimidation, the arrest of critics of the regime, and the constant filtering of online information are often used to keep things under control. Still, one cannot deny that such strategies hinder the possibility of creating a real democratic space where free debate is an option thanks to social media forms (Goldstein & Rotich 2008).

However, social networking sites which expand opportunities of different forms of communications may enable people to bypass the control system, and may lead the masses to overcome the authoritarian regime censorship.[6] Yet, this should not be taken as a general rule; some regimes remain too powerful. Social Media did allow a more open political discussion, though, a discussion that would otherwise not have been possible under the conditions of a restrictive media environment.

The recent mobilizations which happened in Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, have provided strong evidence of how Social Media can be a crucial element in the hands of ordinary citizens. The Arab Spring, for example, has provided academia with much empirical evidence about the role that Social Media had in helping citizens to contribute to news-making. Countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and the like has always found it mandatory to control social media forms in the darkest times of these regimes. (Howard & Hussain 2013). This made it challenging, indeed, to get true, real, and unbiased information on what was happening in reality through mainstream national media. People usually resort to social media since controlling mainstream media was never an option.

Worldwide mainstream media, including all the traditional media forms such as television, newspapers and the like ironically used the information uploaded on Social Media by ordinary citizens as their main sources of news. Citizens, ordinary ones, whether they were aware of it or not, became journalists by

simply reporting to the world through Social Media what was really happening in the street.

5. Conclusion

Media is often considered a world or an engine with the potential of influencing and shaping human actions, regardless of the context. Media's influence on society is undeniable. Yet, it remains always wise to stat that the influence usually develops according to the characteristics of the cultural, political, economic, and historical conditions in which they thrive (Barber 2003). We have in this paper questioned whether a relationship between media, Social Media included, and politics exists at all. In order to answer this question, we have first framed the rich body of research addressing the nature of the relationship existing between these two powerful concepts: Media and Politics. We have then shed light on how the advent of Social Media has further increased the capacity of networked facilities to influence politics. We have discussed how 'information' spread via Social Media is a key element in the development of political knowledge, and political engagement. In addition to this, rather than treating media as a unique dimension of politics, we explored how Media has the ability to influence politics depending on the framework and conditions that shape its use. We, then, tried to unravel how different political actors use Media mobilizing the masses.

With this paper we stated that despite the multiple contrasting arguments addressing the influence of media on the political sphere, and addressing the complicated relation existing between the two realms in an attempt to answer the traditional question: Which is controlling which? Media have made politics more accessible. We have also stressed the importance of social media by revealing that the aim of its use is to circulate information coming from multiple sources.

In this context, when we address the relation between Media and politics, we are interested in understanding how information spread through media impacts politics, and how people in power in return control the type and nature of information delivered. Thus, the two seem to influence the various practices of ordinary citizens in an unprecedented way.

Endnotes

[1] For further discussion of Media's Influence on adolescents' political orientation, see *Media and Civic Socialization* by Jack Mcleod, 2000.

[2] 'Two step flow' model is a part of a theory that suggests that audiences are passive. They believe whatever they get from the Media through 'Opinion leaders'; people they usually trust.

[3] David Croteau and William Hoynes (2003), strongly argue in *Media and Society* that audiences come from different backgrounds and they usually have an attitude that is fostered by media through "Uses and Gratification" model suggesting that the masses get influenced by repetitive exposure to things they choose.

[4] This is exactly what we mean by 'Absence and Significance' and 'presence and significance' in   Media Studies.

[5] For further discussion on Media and the Arab spring, read *The role of Social Media in the Arab Spring* by Zeynep Meral, 2017.

[6] For more information on SNSs and Politics, read "Social Network Sites and Political Engagement: Exploring the Impact of Facebook Connections and Uses on Political Protest and Participation" by Micheal Chan, 2016.

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