

The Impact of Democracy in the Media and Public Opinion

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Abstract: Media in the last two centuries, and especially with the development of science and technology have evolved enough and rightly today not coincidentally are also being considered as the fourth power state, for which freely can say that is presented as the work controller of the three powers of the state. The role of media is great for all societies, regardless of whether they are democratic or not, but rightly is emphasized the role (importance) of the media in democratic societies. So from this, it can be stated that the media are a very important element of the social democratic system and one of the main factors in the development of information society. It is understandable that without this important element, society (especially modern and democraticone), would be deprived of the most important instruments that influence the development of all areas of their lives. While, on the other hand the political system would be without an arm, or without its most important part, which directly affects the good functioning of this system. But, for the establishment of democracy it is required the continued development of free political life and new social relations. Free political life and socio-political relations are an integral and essential part of general democratic structure. The importance of political life in contemporary society is crucial for any political system, especially for the democratic system and the media being in the middle have a very special and important role.

Keywords: media; public opinion; democracy; contemporary socieites

Introduction

In XXI century, the media's role has grown in the world, where today they have a large influence in politics, and are therefore presented as a source of power, but also the media play the role of the government and the opposition control, by trying to make transparent all their activities. So, the media today are also a large corporation, which employs people, who also are considered a source of fame and

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promotion of democratic values, but the media in totalitarian countries are still under the direct control of the government.

The technological development has made a great revolution in social life, and this development has not however left aside the media and other forms of human communication. "The question that now arises from the very mass communications theorists is whether and how much the mass media is in the service of democracy?" (Berisha, 2006), so, "Is media defying the democracy for good or for bad?", a very difficult question to be answered, especially when are known the latest developments regarding media around the world.

In reality, as we all know the main role of the media, or principal activity of the media is the production and dissemination of information in society, regardless the way and tools that is using, but are called as *media regime*, because they historically have set institutions, actors, norms and even processes. (Williams & Carpini, 2011) When it comes to the media, it is very important that the information is as objective as possible, independent of political goals and ideologies, which have the primary purpose of accurate informing, objective and precise for the facts and events which occur, but until today in any society, there has not been full views of media freedom. It may be noted that there were some countries, where this freedom of media have been tried to respect in the maximum, by having even here exceptions in certain cases.

However, the main principle of democracy is that the media have to be free, autonomous and exercise their functions with full responsibility, be able to give the public true, comprehensive and current information's. So, the main purpose of the media is to inform citizens about the activities of public institutions, political, security and surveillance of the citizens in their activity, etc.. Therefore, rightly form these tasks of the media are created the main functions of the media, which are: informative function, orientation, defense, propaganda, educational and recreational (Kabashi, 2004). While, as the main features of the media in a democratic society are universality, truth, versatility, objectivity, ethics, and social mutual influence (Koçi, 2002).

Media and Democracy

Walt Whitman in 1852 said that "*A true poem is the daily paper*" (Williams & Carpini, 2011), which quote was very correct for more than a century, but today

has started to change its importance. But let's not focus on the way how media gives the news, but more in this part the focus will be in the role of media in democracy. Democracy and media are two very important issues and very large topics to be studied, because in itself involve a big parts of information and processes, for which it would be impossible to be studied only in this paper. The media present the entire ways of informing the society and conversation with the public through the printed word, sound, static and dynamic photography, radio or on television, etc.. The main mission and general mission of the media is to create the opportunities and circumstances for communication and interaction between groups, classes and social systems. In this regard, the media appears as spreading of knowledge and culture with active force in society. In order to simplify, I can say that in the media are used the techniques or technical means of public interpersonal communication, through which a society is informed, followed by a certain content.

The role of media in democracy is very big today, especially during the election process in the country. Depoliticization of the media in democracy is of particular importance, as it is the financial independence of the media, which enable the media to perform their function in the free form, fair and positive for society. So, today in Western democracies, it can be created the impression that the media and the government are in constant confrontation about their rights and all this war between them is being made in the name of democracy, therefore, "In democratic societies, it should be like this, the media and the government are in constant disagreement for many issues. The government seeks for protection and closure of the media, while the media are against the closure, respectively its aim is at openness, transparency, etc.." (Berisha, 2006)

As we have seen, the role of media in a democratic society is very big, but to study the importance of the media in democracy, then we should know more also for the role of media and its operation in other undemocratic systems. So, democracy has proven to be the best system of government, it has been able to represent different views and ensure a broad participation of all citizens in decision-making. Therefore, democracy is considered as a precondition for access to other issues in the society, then it is the basic pillar and stronger tool for the development of human society (UNDP, 2004).

As mentioned above, when speaking or writing for the media, then we must consider the fact that we are dealing with a very broad topic and relevant to all systems, especially for a democratic system. For all systems and all societies it has

been proved that the media, especially independent ones have very strong impact on all systems, by even not excluding systems with different regimes. The influence of the media in these systems (authoritarian, totalitarian, etc.), in most cases is controlled by the regime and the people in power, who have managed to retain power only by using the media. These media, which are controlled by different regimes are called as censored media. However, in these systems have also existed cases where the media has been offering fair and objective news to the general public, by causing people to react immediately to the state government decisions.

From this we can conclude that in the first case the media are used by the government in order to maintain power, so they are used as a tool of power. In this case the function of the media has been controlled and censored by the state government. In the second case the media have tended to work independently from the government, trying to be as objective as possible for all issues. In this case, the media have been pursued by the government and most of the time they have been subjected to attempt the supervision by the government. In one word, media in undemocratic countries not only do not control the government, but they become as institute at the service of the ruling power (Bajrami, 2005).

While we are talking about the role of the media in these systems, then we can consider an example: the media in the former communist countries have been censored and controlled by government. This has led to population, or broad masses not to be informed fairly and correctly about all questions. In addition, the media have played a role, may we say, negative one during this time because they did not present the real situation, which existed in these countries. In these systems, media have generally been censored and controlled by the government, so they have served only to the interests of the ruling classes. Here appears a new element, because when it comes to the content of information that the media produce and disseminate, then we must know that they differ depending on the type of property (property holder). The class, in whose hands are the media determines their programming policy. To argue this further, we quoted as saying of Marx and Engels: "The thoughts of the ruling classes are the dominant ideas in any era, i.e. classes that are ruling material force of society, is also its dominant spiritual force. The class that owns the means of material production itself possesses at the same time means of spiritual creativity" (Marks et.alli, 1976).

But, unlike authoritarian systems, where media are controlled and censored, in democracy, the media have a greater freedom to exercise their function. So,

democracy has enabled the role of the media to grow and that their function to be exercised without any oversight by the state government. However, not all democracies applies the same principle. Although in all democracies is proclaimed that the media are free and independent in the exercise of its functions, yet there are occasions when the state power through the media tends to reach certain results. There are a lot of examples around the world, but we can mention the example from Albania, where the media has been under constant threat to be controlled by state authorities, which situation made the former US Ambassador in Tirana, Alexander Arvizu to react on International Press Freedom Day, by saying that: “the future of Albania's in the European Union depends on a strong and independent media” (ISHM, 2013), which message is right, because a free press guarantees a stable democracy for each country, which is prospering the democracy, and this statement is true not only for this country but for all democratic countries or all those countries that tend to build themselves as democratic countries.

Therefore, from this, it can be seen that the ruling class in fragile democracies or authoritarian states with its ideology has penetrated in masterfully and hidden way even in the media. This method of ruling class to defend its privileged position, only became more masked and sophisticated from the old times. At that time Lenin wrote that: “Freedom of the press in bourgeois society consists of the freedom of the rich to subjugate, to distort and lead to backwardness of the used and make pressure against the masses of people for every day and systematically” (Lenin, 1977).

However, in general the role of the media in all democracies is extremely big, there is even talk that the role of media in developed democracies also is being considered as the “*fourth power body*” of the state, because they have a great impact on society, as well as three other most important bodies of the state government (Limani, 2006), but today we must admit that the *media regime* is under constant challenges by economic, political, cultural and more specifically by the technological development, which in a way redirect the creation of the public opinion (Williams & Carpini, 2011)

The Function and Role of Media in Democracy

Democracy was born in Ancient Greece, with the creation of the Greek polis in Athens. So, since that time there have been forms of discussions and decisions that were taken in public, which are also made public for the rest of the people (general

public) by publishing them through the tiles, which were located across the city squares and by informing the people also through verbal calls. Also, in old times there was a broad public opinion, which was considered as the main corrector for politicians and senior government officials. However, in recent centuries, we have some changes about this situation, because the forum for dialogue on politics and society now is taken by the media (Kval-Mellbye-Tranoy, 2005). So, the debate on various issues of democracy have been taken by media, and in order to be useful debate, it should be impartial, based, inclusive and with a variety of participants.

The main function of the media is the formation of opinion for the general public. So, the main function of the media is to inform the public about the news of the day, as Gunther said that today the mass communications media are the connective tissue of democracy (Gunther & Mughan, 2000). No matter by what means is being made the information, in order to come to the public - that information helps the public to form an opinion about certain events, facts, phenomena and processes of interest to society (Boriçi et al., 2000). So, what it can be understood from the function of media in a democratic country, is that the media is characterized with a variety of functions, ranging from information, education, fair trial on state policies, supervision of state institutions, etc..

People cannot take hard decisions on the issues raised before them without having the available free flow of information. Freedom of information is a fundamental aspect of democracy (Gunther & Mughan, 2000), and it is vital to the functioning of that democracy in the right direction. It is precisely this, and what makes democracy desirable - freedom of thought, freedom of speech and expression, all these rights that are ranked among the fundamental human rights. However, on the other hand, Giovanni Sartori warns, or considers that: *“it is dangerous when freedom of expression engender a falsehood freedom”* ... Sartori says that *“the media are the main source of the formation of our opinion and public opinion is nominating base of active democracy”*. He then continues: *“... public opinion is not something, which is born, it is a set of views that interact with the information flows...”* (Sartori, 1998), which in a way in the today's world can create or can participate in the emergence of the international public opinion and global norms (Curran, 2011), which makes the international public sphere to exist.

Media is engaged, or at least has as its ideal, that information of facts to make it not biased and without subjectivity. Media, however, in order to give the society the necessary and useful information, makes analysis by which elaborates the understanding and development of public events, analysis that are in support or in

opposition to the decisions of public officials (Schroeder, 1989). In that way, media through the dissemination of information on the activities of government on various levels, the consequences of these activities, the reasons for the different actions, they manage to create a good basis for an informed public debate, by giving the possibility to voters to use their right to vote effectively, while on the other hand media send important signals to elected persons regarding the opinion of citizens on various issues (Midgaard et al., 2008). But, in some cases media also is being used to change the public opinion about a situation, which in a way goes in a favor of a candidate, and all those who in a way are challenging this new situation are seen, called or even accused as being paranoid conspiracy theorists (Boler, 2008). And for this reason, the media is also considered to have been one of the pillars of democracy, by giving the power to citizens through the information's, so that they make decisions based on such information's and hold their leaders, who are in power accountable towards them. The classical ideal of media is to be a channel that conveys information and ideas. In that way, media convey information about events, which characterize a society, but at the same time are a bridge between different groups, such as between the elected persons and the electorate (Kval-Mellbye-Tranoy, 2006). While a traditional media approach says that media's primary role is to inform, educate and entertain (BBC mission statement). On the other hand the "*peace journalism*" says that media's role is to promote peace, and not only to provide information (Goldrick, 2000).

Media are not the only mean to keep control of the elite of society. Media strengthen the democracy, and they must also contribute to strengthen the debate, to increase the diversity of information, etc.. In that way, media follows information for various events, for the life of society, but they are also as a bridge between government and people, or better to say, the media are found between voters and politicians. However, the media are not only followers of the events, but they are also an arena of exchange of opinions, a forum where debates and conflicts are highlighted. The biggest problem that is faced by media is that they have a very large amount of information's, and for that reason, media are obliged to inform only for those events that are most important ones. How important those topics are and which topics are chosen that depends on the media itself. So, there is a model in which media set the "*Priority*" information's, which should be transferred to the recipient, which model is known in the literature as the model of "*Priorities*" (Limani, 2006).

As it is mentioned above, for media to broadcast a news, that news must pass through various hands until it is given the best forms and the best content, which make the news more easily to be understood by the recipient of the news. In most cases, these topics are chosen by priorities and by importance that the news has, by trying not to take side for any party involved in that topic. For this reason the media are considered as “*Goalkeeper of Information*”, because they receive information, clarify it, simplify it and present it to the public in order to be as understandable for the public. So, this theory of “*Goalkeeper of Information*” starts from the standpoint that these playback processes, are edited by “*Goalkeeper of Information*”, or from the journalists, who has decision-making power within the editorial news agency (Limani, 2006). Obviously, today the main purpose of the media in this case is that the media broadcast as accurate news content as possible, more objective and more understandable for the recipient of the information (news). Therefore, rightly media are called as guardians of people, because they are working on behalf of the people (Kval-Mellbye-Tranoy, 2005). So the media in modern times achieve to detect various critical reports, trying to take responsibility towards the society in order to control the institutions and people in power, and this is understandable, because all these efforts goes towards the benefit of the citizens, and for these reason today media in the modern era are considered as guardians of the interests of the people (Kval-Mellbye-Tranoy, 2005).

And when we're talking about the importance of the media, they sometimes manage that for a certain “*important issues*” to make sit to the table of negotiations politicians and make them to think again about their decision, and in that way media achieves to intervene in public government institutions. So, we can clearly see that in addition to transmission of information, media also carry critical attitude towards power and government officials and, at the same time contributing to the reader's thoughts, viewers and listeners regarding a particular issue.

Role of Public Opinion in Democracy

When talking about the role of the media, we should undoubtedly talk also about the role of public opinion. The role of media in our time has undoubtedly gained a great importance, but on the other hand also the public opinion has become a key factor of political and social organization. As the media also the public opinion are a broad notion. However, there have been attempts by many authors that public opinion notion to be defined more clearly what exactly is meant by this notion. One

opinion says that public opinion is “a thought or belief that most people hold, the voice of the people” (Limani, 2006).

Public opinion as a notion and as an integral part of life is a relatively new phenomenon. The word public opinion has Anglo-Saxon origins and was first used in the late eighteenth century. While public opinion phrase first was used by the famous French dramatist and writer, Luis Sebastian Marcier, and according to him, the public opinion is a “pile of citizens, most of whom support a certain mindset”. But, Solbers, considers public opinion as a “*form of support given to parliament and the government*”.

Public opinion is defined as the attitude of the representatives of a social community on certain political and social issues, to political action of the groups or individuals and to other factors, which have a real impact on society. Public opinion is a way of wider participation of the population in consideration to the general public issues. Public opinion may be defined as a “collective phenomenon of interpretation of information, namely the collective evidence and initiatives to various political and social actions” (Kabashi, 2004).

However, although there is still no clear and full definition of public opinion, most authors think that there are four key factors that are involved in the public notion. First they think that must exist an issue, then should exist a considerable number of individuals who express themselves on that issue, then there should be a kind of consensus among some opinions on that issue and that this consensus should exert influence directly or indirectly (Limani, 2006).

As the author, V. O. Key said that unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talks about democracy is nonsense (Key, 1961). In modern society, public opinion lost the sense of the will of the people, because between the opinion of the citizens and the state government was built a complex system of intermediaries in the form of political parties, mass media, rallies, Parliament, various councils, executive power, etc., (Kabashi, 2004). Public opinion aims to examine and criticize the work of state power, especially the secret state policy, which is one of the main characteristics of authoritarian states. So, the main goal of public opinion is changing social reality, the development and promotion of human relationships, factual, equal and democratic, in order to fight different phenomena and various anti-democratic tendencies. And finally as much as this interconnection between media, policy and public opinion deepens as better the democracy can function, which in practice can be seen as active public, who

responds on policy changes and makes the politicians to responsibly represent the public preferences (Soroka & Wlezien, 2010).

The Media and Public Opinion in USA

When we talk about the media in a democracy, then it is pointless not to take as an example the media freedom in the USA, which is considered the most developed democratic country in the world. Also the public opinion is an integral part of the socio-political system and important form of political and public life there. It is the result of certain forms of democracy, contemporary civilization and political science development. In Anglo-Saxon countries, especially in the USA and in UK, media and public opinion have a special attention. For this reason, we would briefly discuss the role of media and public opinion in the United States, by mentioning different examples.

American citizen at any time is flooded with information on developments inside, as well as abroad, all as a result of a freedom of operation of the media. However, although there is a media freedom, yet not everyone thinks that the media should have complete freedom of their operation. Those who think so, are taking as a pretext the fact that the media have occasionally managed to make weaker the government power through their work. But, US President, Thomas Jefferson had given the answer to those who think like that for the media, which answer he had given with the Declaration of Independence, where he stated: *“Having in consideration that our government base is the opinion of the people, the first objective is that we keep right and, if that will left in my hand to decide whether we should have a state system without newspapers, or newspapers without a state system, I without hesitation would accept the second one”* (Jefferson quoting).

In that way, the right to criticize government authorities guarantee the right to change it, if it deviates from the basic principles stipulated by the constitution. When talking about the American system and the role of the media there, then we can say that there is a full media freedom in the USA and that principle is protected by the USA Constitution. So, in the USA media are free to follow the speeches and statements of government officials and those information's to be transmitted, published, and they are free to follow the proceedings of the Senate and House of Representatives, to follow the judicial proceedings and their live transmission. The greater role in the USA, media use during the election process. Media overflow with unlimited information the American voters, which information's are brought

to voters through radio, newspapers, television, internet and various magazines. It can easily be understood that during the electoral process, political parties exploit all the media, in order to make clear their positions before the American people (Schroeder, 1989).

For this reason, media in the US, which is taken as a model for many other democracies around the world has a big role and are so influential as well. Therefore justifiably are referred as the fourth state power, facing the executive, legislative and judiciary people (Schroeder, 1989). As it is seen, the US media have played an extremely important role, and in some cases also the initiator of further investigations by the judiciary and it made us realize that investigative journalism is more developed in the USA than in others countries of the world. It is said that the decision of a government enjoys or does not enjoy the support of public opinion, that the military action of a government in a foreign country increasingly face more and more accusations of the public opinion or public opinion is distanced about doing any reform in the country on the way how government wants.

In more frequent cases in the US media have managed to convince the broader American public that their government's decision is not fair and it must be opposed, for example, opposition to the war in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc., and many other matters perhaps even more important for the welfare of the American people. This awareness of the American public has existed even earlier, for example, former US President Theodore Roosevelt was aware that the American public was not in the mood to fight during World War II and he was supposed to prepare this public opinion through media propaganda, in order to win greater support, which finally was seen that his initiative proved to be successful. While in some other cases, the media was very keen and to raise the flag with American troops in different regions of the world, by going to war, as was the Gulf War, where media has the power to influence the public opinion (Bennett & Paletz, 1994).

Conclusion

This article was a brief summary about what role had and actually have the media in society, especially in democratic societies. Media activity is not good to be studied as an isolated activity, or separated from other parts of democracy, because as was mentioned above, the importance of the media in contemporary society is

enormous. While, this role is enormous, then any society, or better to say any political system must do their utmost to protect the independence of the media in any way, no matter what it is, adopting laws, by creating a free space for action, etc..

As seen in this paper, the role and function of the media is mostly dependent on the political system, which has existed in various countries. So, the ownership on the media has made them not to be independent and not to be objective and fair in giving information, which lasted all the times, until the media were under censorship. It has existed in various governing system of the Communist type, totalitarian, autocratic, etc., but, unfortunately such systems has yet alive around the world and the media are still in a very serious condition in those countries.

But, democracy has created also a good opportunity for the media, because now they can perform their work freely and without coercion from power. Of course, that media freedom varies today from democracy to democracy, but we can say that media freedom in general, in democratic systems is respected, somewhere less probably somewhere more, but it is an almost satisfactory stage of acceptance of this independence, and for that reason we have external evaluation of freedom of media around the globe by different international organizations.

Also, I can say that the right to information is important for democracy itself, because its survival depends on the media itself. So, the information made people accountable, keeps them well informed, raise their political, public, cultural awareness, etc.. As seen, the media are an important factor to influence and to orient the public opinion. Also we mentioned very well that the media are able for a short time to orient public opinion in different directions, by reaching more easily to manipulate public opinion, and even more easily than the government itself. So, the media play an important role, because they play an extraordinary role in rallying public opinion on different issues and interests. Therefore, for this reason it is even said that who owns the media, he/she is also governing the state, in that way dictate the economic, political, social, financial, and cultural conditions of the development of the country.

And finally we can say that media in a democratic society, should be less directive and propagandistic, but they have to be as much cooperative, independent and as objective as possible. Only in that way, they can provide objective character, broadcasting original news and ensure a flow of ideas and opinions. They must also assist and facilitate as much as possible the greater participation of citizens in the

political sphere of governance and democracy. So, all these tools require a greater independence, but also more knowledge, culture, professional and civic ethic, more responsibility, social commitment to democracy and institutions, to the public, the citizens, etc... So, today the media appear as the highest degree of technological achievements on the one hand, and are used for all forms of proclaiming developments, events, processes, changes around the globe in the other side, and in one word without media the democracy cannot function at all.

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