

# The Democratic Process

The involvement of the media in the democratic process

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The media plays an increasingly important role in the lives of citizens and provide them with entertainment, education and openness to the world around them. But this has not always been so. Indeed, the media has followed and used the technological revolution. Its place in democracy began to be important from 1945. This analysis of the evolution of means of communication between 1947 and our time analyses the abundance of information available to citizens in their daily lives. From this analysis follows logically the issue of the function or role of the media in people's daily lives and the democratic process. But we must not think that the media and therefore journalists remain passive in their approach. Indeed, they are also actors in the public sphere in several ways.

This analysis of the involvement of the media in the democratic process is based on the following excerpt:

In 1949 the Royal Commission on the Press stated:

"The democratic form of society demands of its members an active and intelligent participation in the affairs of their community, whether local or national. It assumes that they are sufficiently well-informed about the issues of the day to be able to form the broad judgements required by election, and to maintain, between elections, the vigilance necessary in those whose governors are their servants and not their masters... Democratic society, therefore, needs a clear and truthful account of events, of their background and their causes; a forum for discussion and informed criticism; and a means whereby individuals and groups can express a point of view or advocate a cause. (RPC, 1949: 100-101 as cited in McQuail, D, (1992) Media Performance, Sage, London)"

Before beginning the analysis of the relevance of this statement to today's society and today's media, it is necessary to start with the basics and understand what a democracy is.

The principle of liberal democracy was developed by the critique of the bourgeois autocracy in early modern Europe. This movement began in the sixteenth century and culminated with the slogan «Liberty, Equality, Fraternity» during the French Revolution of 1789. The right to vote takes a real importance in the British Reform Act of 1832 and gradually spreads to wider and wider sections of the population. Constitutional constraints to fight against the abuse of political power were put in place and Constituent assemblies - such as the British House of Commons - were established. The main concern of liberal democratic theory was thus to grant individuals civil liberties against the incursion of the state (Bobbio, 1987, p10). Liberal democracy guarantee these people to be informed enough to elect the best citizen to govern them. Indeed, they are entrusted with the right to choose who governs them. According to C. Edwin Baker, people in the modern world are apparently much more likely to accept a government as legitimate if they perceive it as democratic. This gain in legitimacy is brought about by elections should improve governmental effectiveness, because people choose their political leaders rather than them being chosen by an elite. Brian McNair (2007) explains that democratic regimes can be defined by the following terms: constitutionality, participation and rational choice.

First, there must be an agreed set of procedures and rules governing the conduct of elections, the behaviour of those who win them and the legitimate activities of dissenters. Typically, rules take the form of a constitution or a bill of rights although some countries haven't a written constitution. Second, the democratic process includes what Bobbio terms a substantial proportion of the people. In an early democratic period, a small minority of the population have some citizenship rights. Gradually, voting rights are extended to the lower classes such as women and black people. Societies which deprive the majority of their people

of voting rights are called undemocratic. A third condition of democracy is the availability of choice and the ability of citizens to exercise a rational choice. This condition pre-supposes a knowledgeable, educated citizenry. This choice is built on a contradiction, for example, Democrat versus Republican, Labour versus conservative, Christian Democrat versus Social Democrat.

## **I. EVOLUTION OF MEANS OF COMMUNICATION BETWEEN 1945 AND OUR TIME**

The industrial revolution gave a real boost to the means of communication that have naturally followed the development of new technologies. It is from 1947, as new discoveries regarding the image and sound have allowed the media, until now reserved for an elite of the population, to democratize among ordinary citizens. To demonstrate the evolution of media and behaviour of citizens in the face of these changes, we will take as an example, the study made by Colin Seymour-Ure (1999). For this study, we will limit the period 1945 to 1999, when the evolution of media has been the most dramatic.

In 1945, there was no television. This period saw the heyday of radio and the press. The radio set was frequently used by about ten million households. However, the choice was limited to 2 BBC stations, one for serious and educational content, and the other for music and entertainment. The nine o'clock evening news which had an audience of half the population during the war, fell quickly in 1945. Regarding the press, the London-editions (a total of nine) were the undisputed leaders in the market and were distributed directly to people's houses. Some newspapers such as the Daily Mirror or the Daily Sketch, recognized as tabloids, were already very popular at the time. Most of the contents were news, not features. Locally published morning papers were highly esteemed as one in five people, mainly in the big cities, were readers. The smallest number of newspapers but with the highest circulation, were evening editions. The national dailies differed sharply in style between the low-circulation qualities and the mass popular movement. «The growth of newspaper profits, largely from advertising, supposedly rescued the press from economic dependence on the state.» (James Curran and Jean Seaton, 2003) On the news-stand, illustration integrated more and more in several popular weekly magazines and feature as everybody's Illustrated, Picture Post. Different segments of the press were developed to reach a neglected population and frequency of publication moved to adapt to flow of information and habits of citizens. Thus we can see the arrival of a magazine intended for the feminine population and weeklies and monthlies. The policy remained the discretion newspapers, including the level of editorial. The press remained very modest and polite, Four-letter words and topless girls were scandals. This type of content was mainly restricted to the male press such as Lilliput or Men Only.

Nowadays, nobody can escape the television. It is everywhere, in most communal pieces of the house (two out of three homes have two or more TV sets and one quarter have three), shops, bars and many other public places reserved to the mass people. Viewers have a choice of five terrestrial channels as BBC 1, BBC2, ITV Channel 3, Channel 4, Channel 5. Together, they produce some 560 hours of programmes a week. The channels of television are divided into two categories; one that is self-financing thanks to advertisements and public channels subsidized by the government. Commercial channels are regulated by the Independent Te-

levision Commission. Cable also enables an opening toward the world and to other extra channels; the most wanted are only devoted to sports and films. The average citizen spends on average 36 hours a week watching television. Favourite programmes are: news, chat shows, soap operas, films, the House of Commons, endless studio discussions among politicians. Though this craze for television; people spend 16 ½ hours a week listening to the radio. As for television, the BBC owns antennas broadcasting (5 national stations and 38 locals). The three national commercial stations and local radio stations are still regulated, but by the Radio Authority this time. Stations mostly broadcast music and chat. «The twentieth-century attempt to provide a service of mixed programmes on national radio and television to all available channels, often in the face of technical problems and pressing commercial considerations, has arguably widened the horizons of public awareness of social life.» (John Keane, 1993)

But television does not just have one competitor and it was already in place before the sound or video could be democratized. Indeed, the press continues to survive thanks to its faithful readers who are 35% of the population. The regional press is undergoing dominance of the national press. The tabloids today weigh very heavily in the market for newspapers because they represent 80% of traffic and about 60% of main dailies. 25% of citizens are lively to buy a local weekly paper and almost 90% are lively to receive an unsolicited free weekly, financed by advertising. The national dailies are governed by eight ownership groups. Indeed, their control over the multimedia organizations has grown considerably and was open to all types of media both in TV, radio, film, video, computer products, recorded music and book publishing, as well as newspapers and magazines.

Use of the Internet was growing explosively. The Daily Telegraph, like a majority of newspapers, produced an on-line version.

## II. THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA ON PEOPLES DAILY LIVES AND DEMOCRATIC

Knowledge and information are on the basis of citizens' political choices. An informed, knowledgeable electorate ensures proper understanding and consideration of democratic politics in the public arena. Political choices must circulate freely and be available to all. According to Bernard Rubin (1977), access to information and participation in the mass media enterprises which shape public opinion and direct private thought must be democratically available to individuals and to groups. But democratic public policies are in another sense too. Democracy advocates the primacy of the individual and has pushed people to act collectively to make large decisions such as electing the president. Brian McNair argues that thanks to this right of expression, the private political views of the individual become the public opinion of people. Political leaders use voting patterns and polls to eshape policies to reflect citizens' trends. Public opinion, in this sense, is formed in a public sphere.

One relevant book, an Introduction to Political Communication, develops five functions of an ideal-type of democratic society. First, there is the surveillance or monitoring function of the media. They have to keep citizens informed about what is happening around them. Second, they must educate as to the meaning and significance of the facts. Third, the media must make available a platform for public political speech, facilitating the formation of public opinion, and feeding that opinion back to the public from whence it came. This must include the provision of space for the expression of opposition. Fourth, the media must give publicity

to governmental and political institution. Such publicity is essential to promote the creation of the thoughts of every citizen. So the media must be sufficiently open to not skew public understanding. Finally, the media serves mainly as the channel for advocacy of political viewpoints in democratic societies. It is an asset for parties seeking an outlet for the articulation of their policies and wanting to touch a mass audience. However, some media such as the press are not impartial. "In an increasingly public relations state the provisions of such subsidies can range from the entirely healthy distribution of essential information with which to explain and facilitate public policy to the nefarious management of news in which being economical with the truth becomes an accessory of political life." (James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, 1996)

Since the eighteenth century the media has grown and now has a place in the democratic political process. The twentieth century saw the achievement of universal suffrage in most developed countries with a capitalist regime. This positive development has been possible in part through the development of communication media, whether television, newspapers, radio or Internet, which are now accessible to mass audience. Graeme Burton (2005) argues that mechanisms of regulation are controlled directly or indirectly by government. Nevertheless, the access of media to the audience often means that government wants to use media to disseminate policy, to promote initiatives to release information into the public domain, to test reactions to possible new laws, and most of all to present in a public sphere a favourable view of government work. Since the 1950s especially, mass communication has been used by politicians as part of the democratic process to reach the citizens. Brian MacNair (2007) demonstrated in a survey that citizens find their main source of information about politics using the mass media. First, some observers argue that the normative assumption of a rational citizenry is not realistic. For Bobbio (1987), liberal democracy do not want its commitment because it lacked education and civic allows their citizens do not make rational choices and compare the information they receive in an economic and political transparency. As Gandy defines the term, an information subsidy is an attempt to produce influence over the actions of others by controlling their access to and use of information relevant to those actions. (Gandy, 1982)

A further obstacle to democracy is often epitomized by the lack of choice or pluralism. Another critical role of media in the democratic process comes from the journalists themselves and more specifically their objectivity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the mass media developed an ethic to protect its reliability and objectivity. Indeed, for many reasons, the transmission of political information by journalists is biased or flawed. This is because man is imperfect and thus consciously or unconsciously, it will orient its choice in his voice that he had chosen. This part will be transmitted in the choice of reporting, the use of words, images and positioning information in the content of the media.

### **III. THE MEDIA AND JOURNALISTS ARE ACTOR IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS**

The media is active in the political sphere. «Family, school, the media. These three institutional spaces, reproducers of dominant values, transformed themselves into sites of negotiation, mediation and reconciliation in the intervening decades, "after the war. (Marc Raboy and Bernard Dagenais, 1992) Production and selection of information by the media allow citizens to have a fairly broad range of current policy, while focusing on key events. Journalists

use current policy to garnish their narrative frameworks and presented as then news stories. These frameworks are developed by combining different actors, different media and the comparison of different sources. This interaction and this competition help to bring out the best in political life. As Gerstle said (1991), journalists communicate to us the meaning of politics. Before 1947, competing frameworks were limited and citizens had the choice of only one dominant framework. Brian McNair (2007) explains that always subject to challenge and revision, the dominant framework, once established, provides the structure within which subsequent events are allocated news value, reported and made sense of.

The press and broadcasting media use different processes to intervene in politics thanks to their functioning and role. The former has a role as opinion-articulation in their approach to political affairs. This role, recognized by the public sphere, requires openness to the environment. During election time, these journalists manage their content in relation to their political preference. It is also true of individual newspapers which support actively their candidate in their campaign and denigrate their opponents. The popular tabloid press works the same way but a lot stronger since it does not hesitate to use propaganda, various levels of distortion, populist manner and disseminates inaccurate and sensational story. However, the broadsheet newspaper will outline their views in more reasoned terms. This attitude is used in particular to build a positive or negative image of a party.

The press is freer than other media to use information and political intervention. The editorial expresses the political orientation of a newspaper and it is the most important voices to create an image or affiliation. To illustrate, Brian McNair cites as an example that the Sun claims to speak for the working classes, frequently voicing their racist, sexist and xenophobic prejudices, while at the same time is reverential and critical of the establishment. The Sunday Times seeks to hold on to and expand its relatively young, affluent readership with a right-of-center iconoclasm which, like the Sun, is by no means averse to putting the boot into the editorial establishment. It should be clearly understood that the voice of a newspaper's editorial does not represent the opinion of the entire population and that there is no link between them and behaviour or beliefs of readers.

Broadcasting has the exclusivity of certain forms of journalistic techniques used in the political sphere. Broadcasting has created its own experts to disseminate such information. British broadcasting is governed by very strict laws regarding impartiality. These laws will inevitably affect journalists who can match the strongly opinionated pundits of the press. A journalist's main role is to transmit political discourse with complete impartiality. The greatest advantage of television is that it can transmit information in an interactive fashion and colour. Asa Briggs and Peter Burke (2002) argue that if that had been all there was to television, there would never have been as many debates as there were in most countries about decency, language, sex, violence and taste, or the standards or codes dealing with them.

Exemplified by the BBC's Question Time on television and on radio Any Questions, the broadcaster can be a platform for exchange of political views during a debate-structured programme. On these programmes, four or five participants, usually grouped into, broadly-speaking, right, left and centre, debate on a common topic, orchestrated by an impartial chairperson. Brian MacNair states, however, that there are some broadcasting formats in which journalists, like their press counterparts, can go beyond the mere reporting of politics and move into the role of active participants.

Under a political interview, presenters have the opportunity to be an active player in the political process. The increased awareness of the importance of public relations by political actors means that they have frequent contact via electronic media to ensure that their political actuality are transmitted and feed their news stories.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is very difficult to deal with all aspects of the link between the media and the public sphere. The media have evolved rapidly with the approach of citizens' relationship to democracy and the role of journalists. The existing channels of communications have escalated and new ones are being added to the list. Indeed, if citizens were restricted in their choices in 1945, this is no longer the case today. Citizens are drowned in a mass of information that is not always checked and can be accessed by means as diverse as television, newspapers, radio or the Internet.

Moreover, this profusion, although too massive, allows citizens to stay informed about current politics and therefore have enough data to make a rational choice. The media have a duty to transmit information to citizens and allow the political world to broadcast its speeches. However, this exchange with citizens is based on basic principles, such as general education and civics, media impartiality and transparency of politicians. The most difficult aspect is the multitude of media and supports available to the citizen who may be drowned in the flood of information.

In addition, journalists (television, radio or press) may also have an active role in the process of democracy. Indeed, they are obliged to share with politicians during emissions, or interviews but also with other people as experts, professionals or ordinary citizens. This helps give the floor to everyone. But journalists are not always impartial and often found their belief in through their articles or editorials. Although in the past, the media were fairly quiet today, they no longer hesitate to display their preferences clearly and openly supporting their candidate.

Finally, it is essential not to forget that the Internet is an inexhaustible source for citizens. This cyber media also influences the fundamentals of politics and requires profound change in the way of communicating politicians and the expectations of cyber citizens. Today, politicians must ensure their awareness on being likable, offering a message with broad resonance and showing up in ads. Politicians must ensure the cohesion between their message and the various tools of communication they use but also adapt them to their target. Citizens are not just dopes, sitting in front of their TVs or computers, waiting to give some Pavlovian response. The basic rules of exchange between citizens have evolved with the arrival of new technology. These inventions change the way people live and make everything that any citizen could want, available at the click of a mouse.

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