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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Valbuena, Victor T.</td>
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Mass Media Power And The Electoral Process

By

Victor T Valbuena
The relationship between the media and the electoral process has for many years held the fascination and interest of political scientists and communication researchers. Communication research literature is replete with studies on media and voting behaviour. In the United States, election studies, particularly those involving the presidency, have become a major growth industry, predictably leading to yet another best-selling publication on The Making of the President.

In Northern and Western Europe, the United States, Israel, India, and to a lesser degree the Philippines, interest remains high in elections research, no doubt a tangible legacy of the influential series of political science monographs on elections - the voting studies by Lazarsfeld et al in the 40's, 50's and 60's - which examined the factors involved in making voting choices. These and other subsequent studies asserted, with varying qualifications, the central and vital role that the media play in the electoral process. Media power and influence may vary, but the studies agree that the media can and do inform, educate, and motivate people to action relative to elections.
The Functions of Mass Media in Society

Harold Lasswell, a political scientist, was one of the first social scientists to develop a paradigm of the communication process and to analyze the structure, political context, and function of the mass media in society. Lasswell (1971) did not only articulate the familiar "Who says what to whom in which channel and with what effect?" paradigm. Lasswell also articulated three main functions of mass communication:

1. the surveillance function, which is to disclose the threats and opportunities affecting a society;
2. the correlation function, which is to relate and interpret events in the environment to enable the society to respond to the changes in that environment;
3. the transmission of social inheritance function, which is to educate and socialize members into the value system and practices of the society.

These three functions correspond to the information, education and mobilization roles that the media play in the electoral process. The surveillance function is the news gathering cum information dissemination role that the media take on to communicate election issues, party platforms, candidates' qualifications, etc. The transmission function is the educational role that the media take on to provide instruction, guidance and understanding to enable citizens to participate in the electoral process. The correlation function is the interpretive role that the media take on to explain the issues involved in the election
process and to urge citizens to act on these issues in terms of the ballot.

Obviously, the media play an important role as a link in the communication process between the government or political parties on the one hand, and the electorate on the other. "The electorate cannot be regarded by itself, or in isolation, or as if it were a sovereign which was the beginning and the end, initiating everything and concluding everything. It is a part of a system of discussion" (Barker 1942). For in society, and in the electoral process, there is a system; it involves the government or the political parties and their candidates to supply the content, the media to transmit it, and the electorate to consume it. (Berelson et al 1971).

Media Power

Research has established that very likely, the information that the media transmit exerts an influence on voters' knowledge and opinions. However, it is necessary to differentiate between the potential, and the actual power and influence of the media in the exercise of these functions. The variations in the operationalisation of the concept of democracy in the ASEAN countries - both at government and media levels - for instance, is a big factor that would spell the difference between potential and real media power and influence.

Precisely because there are too many variables that affect peoples' knowledge, attitudes and behaviour relative to the electoral process, several schools of thought have evolved on the issue of the power and influence of the mass media. (Adams
1983: 161). These schools are:

1. "Media impotence". This school sees all media as inert, ineffectual, and inconsequential. "The media's mirror reflects politics with such accuracy that no distortions or changes in the political world originate in the media. Besides, media messages are seen as no challenge to the awesome forces of family, friends, party, ethnicity, class, and political elites; and media variables rarely excel in multiple regression equations."


Observational data on election behaviour in some ASEAN countries tend to indicate that media do not exercise much power and influence due, indeed, to such socio-cultural factors as influence of family, friends, religion and other group affiliations. Likewise, the inaccessibility of media and their content due to distribution difficulties, language, and cost. It has also been commented that most of the media in the region are controlled by their respective governments that the public does not perceive the media as reliable and credible sources of information and advice on election matters.

2. "Media virility." This school views media output as a pervasive and powerful part of the political processes. It sees media as capable of setting the political agenda
through selection and shaping of the news. And this selection is unavoidably subjective and political. "The media constantly impregnate society with the latest versions of news. They so penetrate throughout the population that it becomes difficult to measure their precise "independent" impact. Ceiling effects are everywhere. In this view, media messages are so saturated and diffused, and so undifferentiated among news outlets, that media influence is like oxygen - a critically important, integral, but invisible part of life."

The idea of total media impotence to affect elections did not agree with observable reality and with political folklore, however. This led to a new generation of researchers in the late 1960s and 1970s resuming the study of media influence on elections (Nie et al, 1976; Miller and Levitin, 1976; Patterson and McClure, 1976; Mendelsohn and O'Keefe, 1976). The most significant findings from this body of research establish that the mass media are, indeed, an important election influence.

3. "Print power". This school agrees in part with the notion of media power, but sees the print media, particularly the newspapers, as the locus of that power. It dismisses television news impact as trivial and overrated.

Some studies suggest that newspapers are more important than television in initiating issues and setting the public's agenda (Shaw and McCombs 1977), in conveying factual information
(Wade and Schramm 1969), and in switching voters with editorials (J. Robinson 1972, 1974)."

Studies on the "alternative press" in the Philippines during the last years of the Marcos Regime tend to support this "print power" school.

4. "Video power". It is said that television has changed the colour and flavour of American politics; it is even credited with having helped in large measure, to elect John F. Kennedy to the presidency. "Reaching a massive audience, television is seen as making or breaking candidates and destroying the parties in a single bound. Neglecting newspapers, viewers see a stream of superficial, compressed stories and sink into prime-time torpor, deluded that they are informed about politics. The political process is thereby thought to be fundamentally affected by the medium of television and its nightly version of the news."

As Martin Schram puts it in his book, The Great American Video Game, Presidential Politics in the Television Age:

"The instrument of television has taken control of the presidential-election process. It is the single greatest factor in determining who gets nominated every fourth summer and who gets elected that fall. Some politicians and strategists have shown remarkable skill at regulating and
even manipulating the television-news coverage. The most successful of them have also enjoyed a bit of good luck.

"Television news has become the greatest force in the nation's presidential process; it also stands as the nation's greatest hope. It remains the only medium that can give the nation what it wants most: the ability to take the measure of the candidates for president in those intangible, up-close-and-personal ways that the newspaper page can never fulfill."

In light of the ownership and control structures of the broadcast media in most parts of the ASEAN Region, however, these assertions may be more valid in the context of the Western democracies.

The issue of media power (and by extension, the power of media practitioners) in the electoral process has given rise to some concern that it endangers the democratic process. Criticism has been levelled against the media for weakness of coverage, that the media has turned to "heavy emphasis on "horse race and hoopla," the de-emphasis of the issues, and the large number of stories dwelling on the personal qualities of the candidates" (Graber 1987).

Journalists have generally defended their practices on the grounds that they merely report what is presented to them and select news according to standard criteria of newsworthiness. Some researches, however, have borne out evidence that journalists have in fact become important actors in election
campaigns. "Journalists are no longer merely passive "eyes and ears'' in the communication process, but play an active, autonomous and influential role in that process" (Asp 1983: 27). The journalist has become a part of the story.

A recurring theme in the findings of recent researches is that journalists, particularly television journalists, exert a powerful influence. Too powerful an influence, according to many. Another oft-repeated theme is that this powerful influence in election campaigns has dire consequences for the democratic system. Siune (1982), in a Scandinavian study, for example, concludes that extensive use of broadcasting, and especially the extensive use of television by both political parties and voters, leads to serious problems for the functioning of democracy. Seymore-Ure, a British media researcher, in a 1974 study, concludes that journalists to a greater degree than before, select the issues to be debated. Countless researches have documented the vital role of the media in election campaigns, but the conclusions the researchers draw reflect grave concern over the growing influence exerted by "the fourth estate".

As Kent Asp puts it:

"One might reasonably hypothesize that journalists' freedom to select and freedom to interpret are greater today than they were, say, twenty years ago, and further, that the change may be particularly marked in the realm of political journalism and is clearly manifested in election campaign coverage over the years. Coverage has evolved from a more strictly narrative form of reportage, in which the population
of events was determined to a greater extent by the parties, toward a more explanatory, interpretive form of reporting, in which content is selected according to criteria defined to a greater extent by the media themselves. This evolution has in turn meant greater leeway for journalists to exert influence in election campaigns.

"A salient feature of this development is that the traditional categories of journalistic products - bulletins/communiques, reportage, background and commentary - are blurring, and the techniques associated with them are often combined in one and the same article or item. Readers and listeners sometimes find it difficult to distinguish reportage from the journalist's own interpretations. Description and interpretation are blended in a manner that makes it difficult for readers or listeners to judge the situation and draw their own conclusions.

"Clearly, this trend greater freedom to select and interpret on the part of the journalist has more than purely negative consequences .... The electorate need questioning and critical journalists to examine politician's records in relation to their rhetoric, their campaign promises and the like. Likewise, we need independent, impartial journalists to ask the questions party leaders least of all want asked."
Conclusion

In a democracy, "there is the implicit assumption that the people have a right to know, that they should be provided with any and all information which might help them to formulate opinions and to influence the policies they wish their government to follow." (Schramm and Roberts, 1971: 640). This assumption gives the mass media a major role and potential power in governance. As citizens have to make numerous decisions on complex and specialised issues, they need the mass media to provide them with much of the information necessary to enable public participation in government. They need the media to insure that the information is at least comprehensive, if not totally complete, to enable the formation of informed consent among the citizens.

The mass media have the responsibility to make sure that the citizens receive all available information about various issues before these issues are resolved by their elected leaders. The media have the responsibility to see that the information is not censored, not distorted, not incomplete. They have the responsibility to ensure that the power which information implies remains diffused throughout the population. This responsibility underlies Douglas Carter's labelling of the mass media as "the fourth estate".

It is clear from research as well as from observational data that the mass media function - with potentially tremendous power - not only to provide information on election-related issues but
also to influence people towards action. However, Asp maintains that conferring power - or authority - on a specific group or institution can be compatible with the principles of political democracy only when two essential criteria are met: (1) the exercise of power must be legitimate, and (2) the exercise of power must be subject to scrutiny and control. The implication is that the greater the measure of power accorded to a group, (in this case the media and media practitioners) the greater the demand we should be able to make on their exercise of that power. Asp concludes that "Greater professional competence on the part of journalists (and other media practitioners) and better scrutiny of their performance are thus two measures that can legitimize the increasing power of the fourth estate."

Bibliography


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