Mass Media and Knowledge Construction:

The Effect of Popular Opinion in Global Politics

Rasmus Thisner

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The internet based Media (news agencies, social networks, forums) has become the most popular channel of communicating information, or "knowledge", in this current era of rapid technological advancement. The incredibly extensive quantity of information that is readily available through the internet allows people to instantly get up-dated with the recent world news, stock market information, celebrity scandals, and the current status of their friends anywhere in the modern world. Rather than being the traditional bearer of knowledge, we are now expected to learn how to effectively find the relevant information, quickly get an understanding of unfamiliar concepts and ideas, and be able to apply this new piece of "knowledge" in appropriate ways.

This entails a new framework for how we need to manage and use all the information that crosses our minds and is constantly available to us. The predicament that initially inspired my research topic is the complexities of relying too much on a commercially independent - and often irresponsible - source of information, in the manifestation of popular knowledge. Moreover, the powerful incentive that exists, for those in the position of such power, is to misuse this medium as a tool to manipulate popular opinion. Thus, my intention is to first investigate the extent to which news media does impact our general knowledge and opinion. Secondly, to consider how media can be used as a tool to manipulate popular opinion and knowledge, and the impact of this disclosure in international relations. My research question will therefore be: To what extent is the news media an effective means to sway popular opinion, and influence general knowledge?

It is no secret that news media has a major role in opinions regarding global politics due to its direct and effective channels of communications, and its extensive accessibility to anyone with a computer and internet connection. The media in the 21st century has advanced its basic operation and function as a result of strong influences from new external and internal interests in its field of operation. Some news agencies have turned into enormous corporation giants, and are much like other businesses, functioning off of the profit from their operations which principally makes them profit oriented organizations[1]. This inevitably leads to the controversial role of the media today, as the news agencies are left to weigh its profit and interests against its social responsibility. This is particularly the case in a democratic society, where free and creative expression, diverse perspectives, and independent thought are highly valued, and has consequently led to question the orientation of news agencies[1], as profit makers, or as genuinely serving the public's interest.

There are obviously numerous factors in the creation of news that influence the quality and authenticity of the news that is finally presented to the audience. Joris Luyendijk, a Dutch non-fiction author and once a Middle Eastern-correspondent, recalls his own experiences of the striking 'flaws' in the reporting from the region[5]. He points out that personal ideologies and ignorance are apparent influences on the selection and framing of news, but highlights the "dilemmas inherent in the collection and representation of information"[5], which are at least as important. These include the basic background knowledge about the situation that is being reported, the quality of primary research conducted, and ultimately the framing of the event[5]. He recounts his "disheartening" discoveries of how journalists from prominent news stations such as CNN and New York Times, who live well above the average life standard, far removed from the real setting of events, most of the time with an interpreter on the side, and produce news with unbalanced vocabulary. This disclosure may not be a surprise, but it does highlight the significant discrepancies that exist in the first phase of writing a news article. Already at this stage, professional training, social and cultural biases, and personal evaluation and selection

effect the tone, authenticity and quality of news. In addition to a reporter's biases and judgments, the media station certainly has its own particular traits of 'dominant cultural order' which the reporting is framed within.

Stuart Hall is a cultural theorist and sociologist, known for his Encoding/Decoding Model. It considers the production and reception of news 'messages', the process in which a reader interprets the news. Hall is primary concerned with the "class struggle in language"[6], which suggests that people from different groups in society - age, gender, ethnic group, education - will see news in their own respective way. He explains that a 'cultural consciousness,' or inherent bias of the specific classes, is responsible for this discrepancy. Greg Philo clarifies this in his explanation of Hall's work as follows;

> "the codes refer signs [the meaning of a text] to the 'maps of meaning' into which any culture is classified; and those 'maps of social reality' have the whole range of social meanings, practices and usages, power and interest written in to them"[6]

The 'maps of meaning', or 'reality', constitute our frames of interpretation and analysis and have certain social biases and interests unconsciously encoded in them. Hall describes that there is also a "dominant cultural order"[6] –known as an hegemonic viewpoint and exists as a "taken-for-granted" kind of knowledge, which we automatically employ in our interpretations of news[6]. This is the general 'map of meaning' which encompasses those of the various 'classes' in a society. The language and images of news media can thus be 'encoded' based on this dominant cultural order. For example, this could affect what footage or detail to include, emphasize or just leave out of the news piece.

This leaves room for a great variation of understandings concerning the same news piece, due to the variety of 'maps of meaning' that exist. A coarse example would be that the supporters of a sports team would generally see the penalties against the opposite team as legitimate, as opposed to the ones given to their own team. Essentially, people use their own 'maps of reality' to de-construct the intended (encoded) message, which is specifically conceived based on the 'dominant cultural order', but individually decoded and interpreted due to the various class biases of social reality. This knowledge can therefore essentially be used to customize news to specific groups in society, with specific connotations of an event specifically addressing an indicative bias of the social group.

Philo's own conclusion however, is that people usually do not construct new meanings from news, but can share an understanding of what is being presented although there may not be an agreement in opinion[7]. Philo believes that people are not 'sealed off' from within their own cultural space, but are aware of values and definitions that are offered by others. This would suggest that the public opinion is not easily bent by news media, since people in general can objectively interpret and analyze news.

But this conclusion would not consolidate the impact on the public's general knowledge, and in turn, its effect on public opinion. The acquisition of new knowledge will naturally alter your opinion, whether it is reinforced or changed, in spite of the fact that you are able to understand a perspective while not agreeing with it. So, building on our current conclusion, we may ask the quintessential question: how does the news media effect the construction of public knowledge?

Yet again, Greg Philo offers a study conducted in England, to investigate the impact that news has on the construction of public knowledge, and thus naturally, the public opinion.

The survey inquired about the opinion on British tax policies and the redistribution of income, as well as opinion on the Israel – Palestine conflict. It was shown that most people were in fact unaware of that 10 per cent of the British population owned more than half the private wealth, while the poor still paid a greater portion of their income in taxes[6]. This new piece of knowledge made many people upset about this government policy. Furthermore, most people were initially prone to put the blame on the Palestinians for the outburst of violence, but tended to change their opinion when they were briefly informed about the history of the conflict. The responsibility for the misunderstandings of these situations was naturally put on the media for not informing the public properly[6].

The conclusion that is drawn from this study is that people in a society generally form their knowledge on what is presented in the local news media, and unconsciously build their opinion on this piece of news. This survey clearly suggests that that the context in which the news is presented, moreover the quantity of information provided, can shift the opinion dramatically. So in essence, unless the opinion is critically assessed and discussed with others, the media stand as the dominant source of influence in the construction of public opinion.

Burma represents one extreme case where the media has been in a total control by the dictatorial regime currently in power. Although the power and liberty of media is simply put in the hands of the state, it serves an important function in the greater scheme of the aristocracy. The country has been socially and politically isolated from the world for the better part since its independence in 1948[7]. Only occasionally has news feed from within the country been able to escape out into the global news network.

The government has methodically increased its monopoly of the media to ultimately secure its position of power to enjoy the liberty of isolating its operations from the free and independent news agencies around the world. This serves an essential function in its ambition to control and maintain political power in Burma. When Burma was eventually forced to lift the barricade in the late 1980s due to the financial and political turmoil that had developed, Saw Maung, the head of state at the time, had desperately tried to "dominate the agenda of international media"[3] to communicate the 'truth' about Burma. However, he strongly disliked the 'journalistic technique' as "the international media attention is a much more complex issue to manage, in which possibilities for legitimizing authoritarian measures are very limited indeed"[3]. This underlines the interest that exist to manipulate the power that media has in political interests and affairs, to base the 'truth' on a specific 'dominant cultural order' and thus undermine other, less favorable perspectives of an event. It is difficult to alter the mainstream interpretation if it has already been constructed in the minds of the general population.

Perhaps as a result of the totalitarian control of the media in Burma, it became one of the first countries where the internet played a huge role in transmitting media. In 1994, conventional warfare in the jungle instead turned to cyber wars, which opened up a "completely new kind of boundary along which the regime had to defend itself from attack"[3]. Through the internet media, the information that was allowed to slip through the governments isolation inspired a movement and initiative that eventually spread its cause all over the US and Europe. This ultimately pushed countries to ban their trade with Burma, in an effort to end the oppression of

Burma. The movement built up great support, and spread to over 150 universities in North America, and achieved a huge victory when President Bill Clinton eventually banned all American investment with Burma in 1997.[3]

The war on Iraq offers an excellent example to highlight a government's interest in and benefits from the news media, and does unmask some of the potential powers of the mass media and public opinion. At the time when US had declared war on Iraq despite the censure from most countries, not to mention the UN Security Council, it was essential for the Bush Administration legitimize this drastic action. Although sufficient concrete evidence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (WMD) was not available at the time, the Bush Administration succeeded to gather enough support based on its claims that Iraq was developing WMD, providing substantial support to the al Qaeda terrorist group, and Saddam Hussein was actively involved with al Qaeda[4]. The situation started to become very intense for the Bush Administration when Iraq was finally occupied and no trace of WMDs could be found to justify the occupation. In spite of this awkwardness, a poll survey showed that there had actually been an increase in domestic support for the war, as opposed to an expected decline[4].

In the effort to unmask the reason behind this startling change in domestic support, a study uncovered evidence that strongly suggested that this support was in fact due to a major misperception in the general knowledge about the war[4]. In the analysis of the survey data, it became apparent that there had been great misperceptions amongst the public, and even the big news agencies, regarding the facts about the avowed reasons justification for the war, and this even before it had begun. The statistical figures showed that a substantial share of the US population thought that evidence of a link between Iraq and al Qaeda had been uncovered, both before and during. It was believed that Iraq did in fact have WMD in possession (before the opposite was proven), and that the world in general was in great support of the war[4].

The study points at the Bush administration as a primary source for the major misperceptions that indirectly offered a much needed support for the war[4]. It is quite clear that the Bush Administration intentionally used and built upon the general misperception of the war to gain additional support[4]. In a Presidential Letter to Congress, President Bush explained that he was taking:

> "the necessary actions against international terrorists and terrorist organizations, including those nations, organizations, or persons who planned authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001" [4]

> – March 18, 2003

This statement, along with several others, strongly implied that there was enough intelligence to justify the occupation of Iraq, and implicitly strengthening the already existing misperceptions about the war. This clearly illustrates a case where the media has been used as a tool to swing public opinion based on the government's ability to manipulate the public general knowledge.

Hence, I conclude that media does have a significant effect on the public general knowledge, which naturally becomes the case when most of our information is in fact gathered from news agencies. However, this may vary if one decides to look deeper into events, where a research of several different news sources will accommodate a more independent thought and perspective.

This also is true regarding the public opinion, which I would argue can be substantially influenced by the news media, if not the opinion is discussed and analyzed with others to achieve a critical and independent perspective. The power of the mass opinion of the public, however, still persists until neutralized by the check and balances of other dominant actors in the paradigm of international relations.

Foucault is of the belief that:

> "Each society has its regime of truth, its general politics of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements the means by which each is sanctioned the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" [2].

This idea promotes Stuart Hall's model, which talks about a 'dominant cultural order' that encompasses the various social-group-classifications of how news is interpreted. Hence, it is clearly supported that, news will be interpreted differently in other societies, that embraces other 'maps of [social] reality' If you thereafter also incorporate the various influences that the journalist and news agency incur on the piece of news, an accurate account of the event can seldom be unmistakably encoded for each person. Because of this reason, I argue that it is the responsibility of the individual to realize the various mechanisms that are involved in the process of encoding a message, and how it later is decoded, and thus turn to additional sources to build a more independent opinion if a more accurate account is wanted.

Foucault also believes that it is not the intellectual that is the "bearer of universal values"[2] in our society, but the person with a specific position that is linked to the apparatus of truth[2]. In other words, it is a person in a position to influence what is truth and what is not, who has the power of influencing the truth structures in society, and the messages in news media. The Bush Administration presents an excellent example of this. It is not necessarily the intellectual person, who is already aware of the "true" facts about the war, who is in power, but the person with a certain position in society, which grants power of influence. The Bush Administration was, because of its superior position, able to gather additional support for the cause of war due to its knowledge about general misperception, able to encode the message in such way as to exploit the 'dominant cultural order', and implicitly, although only temporarily, construct knowledge in the minds of the people. As this knowledge in fact did alter public opinion in favor of the war, it also emphasizes the vulnerability of a democratic society to the misuse of news media due to power interests in international relations.

Since the interests to manipulate media does exist in international relations, the problem does not involve "changing people's consciousnesses – or what's in their heads – but the political, economic , institutional, regime of the production of truth"[2], which Foucault points out. Still, until such changes can happen, the claim of this paper remains: the extent to which we automatically qualify the information received from media as true knowledge without sufficiently scrutinizing its validity or level of truth, will inevitably make us all the pawns of a strategic game, played by those with power and knowledge in the system of international relations.

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