Foreword

Negotiating Control: The Evolving Political Journalism Culture

Political and media institutions are so deeply intertwined, so thoroughly engaged in a complex Tango dance with each other. Politics has become increasingly mediatised, though the process of mediatisation has not yet been properly addressed and understood. Political thinking distinguishes between two radically distinct meanings of power: power as a transformative capacity and power as domination, thus entailing asymmetry between those with whom power rests and those over whom power is exercised.

The struggle for ‘communication rights,’ their activism, and attempts at curbing them are not just indicative of the importance that free media acquire in contemporary existence but are also a yardstick to measure the effectiveness of a nation-state’s commitment to democracy and its future. The power of the media in a democracy stems from its being the ‘watchdog’ of society, the ‘fourth estate’ providing the necessary checks and balances on issues that concern the masses. The regression of mainstream media from ‘watchdogs’ of democracy to business ventures, resulting in the Habermasian ‘re-feudalisation of the public sphere,’ is a worrisome issue. Richards and Rees describe the emotional public sphere in their article the ‘Situated, Embodied and Political’ as ”[t]he ever-present accompaniment to the 'public sphere' (deliberative enclaves and burglar alarms) of … debates and value contestations which underpin the democratic process” (as cited in Blaagaard, 2013).
Journalism carries an inbuilt contradiction between the claim to universal objectivity and the call on the profession to veil its bias through discourses of professionalism that both guide journalistic practice and act as a moral cover (Schudson, 2003). Foreign news is arguably the only means of global public education. However, reporting differs across the global North-South divide, especially how different ownership characteristics, audience targets, and levels of national interest in a country or an event affect how news is reported.

The geopolitics of representation reveals a great deal about who decides what news is, the different ways national media define a story, and what this means for the public that consume the news. It highlights the specific ways in which news organizations strategically construct and report an event. However, the geopolitics of representation lacks offering a historical perspective of current events. The tunnel vision focuses on coverage of one crisis at a time and is preoccupied with events that have direct domestic linkage. The main concern here relates to the fact that little effort has been given to reporting and analyzing the devastating political economy in Africa. The spectre of media bias is widespread in mainstream public discourse. Biased news is typically understood as systematic favouritism (Niven, 2002) which alters ideology, a political entity, or individuals through unfair portrayal, positive or negative, based on deliberate patterns of media coverage. Given the centrality of communication to society, who ‘owns’ the media, who gets to speak on behalf of whom, and to what end are critical issues.

News is readily available in advanced democracies. Through media, citizens gain access to a vast and incessant flood of current affairs information. Commercial media typically saturate the news scene with a daily deluge of stories. These are supposed to form the bedrock of public information which should help citizens monitor and evaluate the performance of governments and
accurately reward or punish them at election time. However, news outlets will hesitate to cover stories that offend their sources of revenue or that show these sources in a negative light.

The sociology of professions, with its emphasis on boundary maintenance, is used to examine journalism as a boundary work, profession, and ideology. Each of these aspects contributes to the formation of journalism’s professional logic of control over content. Most reporters are trained through on-the-job apprenticeship, college and graduate courses, or some combination of experience and courses. Based on this foundation, journalists learn the industry conventions regarding which events are newsworthy.

Reporters from competing news outlets who are engaged in the same beat usually know one another well and may have stronger relationships with one another than with reporters from their own paper or network who are engaged in different beats (Tuchman, 1978). For issues with consistently high levels of coverage or large attention spikes, a cohesive national agenda almost certainly exists, and major news sources show similar patterns in coverage.

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References


