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The Mass Media & Public Opinion: Analysing Media Effects vis-à-vis Public Opinion Formation

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to analyse some theorisations and studies on the interlinkage between mass media effects vis-à-vis public opinion formation. This is not an endeavour in mere narrating some studies rather it seeks to focus on the criticality of the analyses concerning the relationship between the mass media and the formation of public opinion. Hence, the paper is divided into three sections the first section focuses on the importance of the media-effects perspective and analyses the agenda setting approach and studies associated with it. The second section focuses on some critical theorisations and perspectives focussing on issue salience and construction of the media content having prime role to play in public opinion formation. And finally the concluding section briefly states the implications of the above mentioned studies and theorisations in terms of the relationship between the mass media and the formation of public opinion.*

Key Words: *Media-effects, public opinion formation, agenda-setting, framing, priming, spiral of silence, issue salience, manufactured consent.*

I

Public opinion research has long been embodied through empirical analysis in the form of systematic data collection but at the same time it must be noted that, data quantification and measurement may not always help in gauging public opinion and tracing the intricacies of the public opinion formation process. Thus, scholars like Blumer, Benjamin Ginsberg, Theodore L. Glasser and Charles T. Salmon have always been critical of considering the collection of polling data as a measure of public opinion. The outcome of the opinion formation process in the form of a mediated or a manufactured or a manipulated public opinion cannot be answered comprehensively in terms of such empirical analyses. It is at this critical juncture that, the analyses of Lowell, Lippmann, Dewey, Lasswell forays into integrating the empirical and the normative methods into public opinion research. According to them public opinion is essentially a communication concept therefore, they approach the phenomenon of public opinion formation from the **media-effects perspective** whereby the mass media is envisaged as the opinion moulder. Accordingly, later scholars like, Harwood Childs, Bernerd Berelson, Janusz Zilikowski, William Albig, Vincent Price, Jean Converse, Susan Herbst, Anthony Oberschall, Wolfgang Donsbach, Michael W. Traugott, Caroll Glynn concludes though with variations in their analytical style that, public opinion is essentially a communication concept, whereby the communication media, basically the mass media brings in significant perspectives in terms of research.

Complex societies are characterised by the people's reliability on the mass media for information as well as the impossibility on the part of the people to carefully scrutinize and evaluate every message they encounter. It is where the mass media compounds the situation through its surveillance function, by virtue of which, it monitors and reports on political and social matters leading the people to learn about political and social issues, to assess which issues are important, and to gauge which positions the majority of people endorse. This scenario boosts the development of perspectives in studying the inter-relationship between the mass media and the public opinion. A classic exposition of this is found in Walter Lippmann who, stated that, the public (people) form public opinion based on the pictures of reality that are in their heads, as elaborated and shaped by the mass media[1]. As such the media acts as mere conveyors of information or as the disseminators of the reality created by them. Here, mention may be made of Harold Lasswell

[1] Lippmann Walter, *Public Opinion,* Transaction Publishers, USA & UK, p 29

who, defined three key functions of communication for societies that also have clear ramifications for public opinion, such as surveillance (keeping one another abreast of what is taking place in the world), correlation (the ability to keep using touch with what others are thinking about what is going on, the interpretation of events, etc.), and transmission (the passing of norms and morals to others)[2].

The development of specific forms of mass media on the formation and presentation of public opinion on these functions cannot be denied. The advent and development of the various forms of mass media has been intertwined with the process of public opinion to come into being. The printing press enabled the formation of modern publics and thereby, mass printing in the form of newspapers and other written materials served as a catalyst enabling the mobilization of groups for political causes as well as the development of public opinion communication. Gradually as motion pictures and then television entered the scene becoming mainstream entertainment medium it widened the scope for public consumption of entertainment, creating a new venue for public opinion formation and information exchange. The earliest exposition on the media-effects approach lies in the theories of the **all-powerful media and propaganda effects** as propounded by Lowery and DeFleur, Hadley Cantril and Harold Lasswell. Michael Kunczik and Eva Johanna Schweitzer in their article *The Use of Public Opinion Research in Propaganda* (2007) examines the implications of the propaganda study in terms of public opinion research. According to them, the mass media became channels of persuasive messages during World War II and propaganda got associated with the management of public opinion[3].

The second major exposition of this approach was provided by Paul Lazarsfeld who had been instrumental in the establishment of the Bureau of Applied Social Research (BASR) at Columbia University, which provided training to a generation of communications and public opinion researchers and survey analysts and discovered the fact of selective exposure of the public to media messages, the role of opinion leaders in the social milieu of ordinary citizens, the two-step flow of communications and its dampening effect on the power of the mass media, improvising the theoretical side. In this regard mention maybe made of the landmark 1955 study by Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz, published as *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications* where in terms of rigorous studies they refuted, the undisciplined body of pre-war thought of a powerful media as a myth and on the contrary held that media impact is in fact limited by personal influence[4]. However, since the 1970s this approach got intertwined with the cognitive turn in the social sciences whereby media scholarship moved away from the so-called "minimal effects" paradigm gravitating towards a return to all-powerful media primarily helping individuals to define their social reality. In terms of effectivity the interplay between mass media and public opinion can be considered in two broad categories as mentioned by Carroll J. Glynn and Irkwon Jeong[5]. First, how does the public become informed about public issues from the mass media? An answer to this requires the study of media effects exploring the methods of agenda setting, framing, and priming. Second, how does the public react to information about public issues presented in the mass media? An answer to this lies in the exploration of cultivation theory, the knowledge gap, media dependency, and uses and gratifications.

As a counter-concept to the traditional media effects paradigm of persuasion, a distinct line of research known **studies on agenda setting** that provides the major foundation of contemporary theories on public opinion based upon this approach was initiated by Max McCombs and Donald Shaw. The basic hypothesis for agenda-setting research was provided by, Bernard C. Cohen by stating that, news media may not be successful in telling people what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling them what to think about[6]. Agenda-setting research, got its initial inputs from communication scholars Max McCombs and Donald Shaw as well as political scientists Roger Cobb and Charles Elder, later scholars like James W. Dearing, Everett M. Rogers, Shanto Iyengar enhanced this field of study. Simply put, the term agenda setting refers to the ability of the mass media to direct attention to specific issues and the news media's power to structure the importance of political issues in the public's mind.

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[2] Lasswell Harold, "The Structure and Function of Communication' in society", L. Bryson (ed) *The Communication of Ideas*, Harper, New York, 1948, pp 85-91.

[3] Kunczik Michael & Eva Johanna Schweitzer, "The Use of Public Opinion Research in Propaganda", Wolfgang Donsbach & Michael W. Traugott (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 2007, pp 497-498.

[4]Katz Elihu & Paul Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*, Free Press, Glencoe, Illinois, pp 14-52.

[5]Carroll J. Glynn and Irkwon Jeong, "Public Opinion and the Media", Donald H. Johnston (ed) Encyclopedia of International Media and Communications, L-P Academic Press ,Vol: 3, 2003, p 633

[6] Cohen Bernard C, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, The University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1963, p 13.

As the cognitive perspective of media effects, agenda-setting assumes people's perceptions of reality to be the main target of media impact. The very first empirical study of the agenda-setting influence was conducted by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, during the 1968 U.S. presidential election where, voters were asked to name the most important issues of the day and their responses closely reflected the pattern of news coverage during the previous month in the mix of newspapers, network television news, and news magazines available to them[7]. This study attempted to explain that, although different people may feel differently but they believe that the most important stories are those that are reported at the beginning of a newscast, are placed on the front page, take up the most space in the newspaper, or take up the most time on a televised newscast.

Another important empirical study in the field of agenda-setting was done by Rogers and Dearing's regarding public attention to AIDS. To them, the study of agenda-setting is the study of social change and of social stability[8]. They followed Roger Cobb and Charles Elder's definition of an agenda in political terms as a general set of political controversies meriting the attention of the polity. As such they defined the agenda-setting process as being composed of the media agenda, the public agenda, and the policy agenda, and the interrelationships existing among them[9]. Each of these three types of agendas stipulates a distinct research tradition. Firstly, the media-agenda-setting research tradition whose main variable is the importance of an issue on the mass media agenda. Secondly, public-agenda-setting research tradition whose main dependent variable is the importance of a set of issues on the public agenda. And thirdly, policy-agenda-setting research tradition whose distinctive aspect is its concern with policy actions regarding an issue, in part as a response to the media agenda and the public agenda. So, the agenda-setting process is an ongoing competition among the proponents of a set of issues to gain the attention of media professionals, the public, and policy elites. They presented a historiography of agenda-setting and started their analysis with reference to Walter Lippmann, as the one who, postulated a relationship between the mass media agenda and the public agenda.

McCombs presented a systematic exposition of agenda-setting as media effects in his article *The Agenda-Setting Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion* (2011) where he stated that, the news media can set the agenda for the public's attention to issues around which public opinion forms[10]. According to him, the principal outlines of this influence were sketched by Walter Lippmann in his 1922 classic, *Public Opinion*, which began with a chapter titled "*The World Outside and the Pictures in Our Heads*" where, he who noted, the news media are a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of public affairs[11]. Rogers, Dearing, McCombs and Shaw, all in their analyses held that, the key factor in the agenda-setting process is 'salience' which refers to the degree to which an issue on the agenda is perceived as relatively important. Roessler, Glynn and Jeong are of the view that, early agenda-setting studies explored the impact of the news agenda on the public agenda whereas, in recent, research the central question of agenda-setting studies has changed from who sets the public agenda to who sets the news agenda enquiring into specific forms of the media[12].

More recently agenda-setting has been complemented by additional approaches of **framing** which refers to the patterns of interpretation prevalent in media coverage and in people's minds emphasizing certain aspects of reality while ignoring others and priming as the process in which dominant aspects of media coverage serve as criteria for individual decision making. Hence, agenda-setting along with framing and priming comprise relevant concepts in the field of cognitive media effects while, integrating aspects of opinion-formation. Each of the issues on an agenda has numerous attributes or characteristics and properties. Just as issues vary in salience, so do their attributes. McCombs focused on the relative emphasis of various aspects of an issue while some aspects are covered in the news and others are not, this

[7] McCombs Maxwell E & Donald L Shaw, "The Agenda Setting Function of the Mass Media", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol: 36 (2), 1972 pp 176-187.

[8] Dearing James W & Everett M Rogers, *Agenda Setting*, Sage Publications, London & New Delhi, 1996, p 2.

[9] *Ibid*, pp 5-6.

[10] McCombs Maxwell E, "The Agenda-Setting Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion" @ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237394610, 2011, pp 1-22.

[11] McCombs Maxwell E, "The Agenda-Setting Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion", *Op.Cit*, pp 1-2.

[12] Glynn Carroll, J & Irkwon Jeong, "Public Opinion and the Media", Donald H. Johnston (eds), *Encyclopedia of International Media and Communications*, L-P Academic Press, Volume: 3, 2003, pp 632-636; Patrick Roessler "Agenda-Setting, Framing and Priming", Donsbach and Michael W. Traugott (eds) *Op.Cit*, p 205

makes a considerable difference in how people view that issue[13]. From the pattern of the total news coverage, the public learns about the importance of issues. This has been termed as second level agenda setting, that is, **framing.**

News framing concerns the structural aspects of news stories, including examination of the symbols used in constructing news stories referring to a meaningful central organizing idea or story line which, then becomes more salient in the specific communication as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation or treatment recommendation. Following Robert Entman, Glynn and Jeong suggested that, there are four main purposes of framing: (1) to define problems, (2) to diagnose causes, (3) to make moral judgments, and (4) to suggest remedies[14]. While preparing for a meeting of schemata, i.e., a common ground the communicator attempts to give salience to those parts of the story that may fit with the existing schemata in a receiver's belief system. The ways in which news coverage schematically frames public issues is the main concern of the framing theories based on this approach. Along with emphasizing salience the power of the frame also lies in what it leaves out, the manner in which certain themes and issues are placed in the frame, while others are diminished in potential salience by being left out of the frame.

McCombs states that, the best documented consequence of object and issue salience is the **priming** of perspectives[15]. Derived from psychological theories, priming is the process in which news media call attention to some issues while ignoring others (agenda-setting component), and thereby influence the standard by which the public judges political figures and issues. Thus, it is the process through which the news media call attention to some issues while ignoring others. By way of priming, television news as well as the other news media influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged. Shanto Iyengar and Donald Kinder conducted an extensive series of agenda-setting experiments later published as *News That Matters* (1987) which, produced significant evidence of a priming effect by television news on people's opinions about the president's overall performance in office[16].

Iyengar and his colleagues demonstrated that when the news media focus on certain political issues, it ''primes'' the public to evaluate the performance of politicians and others on the issues to which the media accord importance. Rather than engaging in a comprehensive analysis based on their total store of information, citizens routinely draw upon those bits of information relying upon the agenda of salient objects and attributes in their minds, the agenda that is shaped to a considerable degree by the mass media. From the works of Roessler, Glynn, Jeong and Iyengar it can be held that, when faced with bewildering array of complex information about an issue, members of the public must choose which facets of the issue they will consider most relevant or important for opinion formation. The media provide the public with cues about the issue that they can use when forming their opinions about the issue but, it must be noted that, media-generated priming effects exist for a relatively short-term period.

II

The above mentioned agenda setting studies dealing with the effectivity of the media in moulding and forming public opinion harping based on the two-fold relationship between public opinion and the mass media enriched the field of public opinion research. However, simultaneously, there also developed a critical line of research relating to the interrelationship between media effects and public opinion from the perspective of (audience/public) perceptions. The most outstanding theory in this regard is The Spiral of Silence theory as formulated by Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann in the early 1970s, which is considered to be the most prominent theoretical models of opinion formation and consensus building in modern societies. Later, scholars like Charles Salmon and Chi-Yung Moh, Glynn and Jeong followed this theory and based it on the assumption that society is a potentially intimidating environment for the individual, a setting in which intense social pressure can be brought to bear on the person who dares to test the boundaries of the crowd. This theory holds that, one's perception of the distribution of public opinion affects one's willingness (or lack thereof) to express opinions. Individuals who notice that their personal opinions are spreading will voice these opinions self-confidently in public whereas those who notice that their opinions are 'losing ground' will be inclined to adopt a more reserved attitude and remain silent.

[13] McCombs Maxwell E, "The Agenda-Setting Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion", *Op.Cit*, pp 7-8.

[14] Glynn Carroll, J & Irkwon Jeong, *Op.Cit*, pp 634-635.

[15] McCombs Maxwell E, "The Agenda-Setting Role of the Mass Media in the Shaping of Public Opinion", *Op.Cit*, p 12.

[16] Iyengar Shanto & Donald Kinder (eds) *News That Matters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1987, pp 16-34.

Noelle-Neumann initiated this theory with two important articles, they are, *Return to the concept of powerful mass media* (1973) and *Turbulences in the climate of opinion: Methodological applications of spiral of silence theory* (1977). She based her theorizing on the premise that individuals have a 'quasistatistical sense' that allows them to gauge the opinion climate in a society, i.e., the proportions of people who favour or oppose a given issue. In addition to the quasi-statistical sense, she introduces a second key concept, i.e., the fear of isolation which, is based on the assumption that social collectives threaten individuals who deviate from social norms and majority views with isolation or even ostracism[17]. This means that, individuals are constantly fearful of isolating themselves with unpopular views or behaviour that violates social norms. Later in her *The spiral of silence: Public opinion, our social skin* which was published in two editions, the first one in 1984 and the second one in 1993, she offers a detailed and systematic exposition of this theory. According to her, people's relationships with others are so critical to them that they will do anything, even change their opinions or become silent about them, to be accepted by others thus, for the individual, 'not isolating himself is more important than his own judgment'[18].

While attempting to analyse impacts on public opinion beyond interpersonal interaction, Noelle-Neumann ascribed importance on the effectivity of the mass media on the formation and presentation of the public's opinions. Thereby, placing the dynamic of social interaction under the active manipulation of the media, arguing that the content and the actual existence or lack of personal discussion is dependent on the media[19]. Therefore, in this context public opinion is the dominating opinion which compels compliance of attitude and behaviour in that it threatens the dissenting individual with the fear of isolation which, becomes the driving force behind individual compliance with the dominant opinion. Dietram A. Scheufele in his article *Spiral of Silence Theory* (2007) holds that this theory is essentially a dynamic process and that, there are two contingent conditions whereby this spiralling process takes place. The first one is the nature of the issue that is being discussed and the second one is the news media[20]. The media play a preeminent role in providing the information individuals use to determine the distribution of opinions in the wider society. This theory presents a strong case for media influence and effects based on the perceptions that, the mass media is everywhere (ubiquitous) and repeat the same messages over and over (consonance) hence, constantly bombarding people with information and constantly framing their social reality. However, the theory has been criticized for ignoring the central role of personal contacts and reference groups in the shaping of individual political orientations.

Finally, another critical exposition of the media-effects approach to the study of public opinion can be discerned from the perspective of the construction of media content. Construction of news as a social product can take place at the micro level when, journalists who create news stories and their editors may unknowingly shape content. At the macro level, the construction of news and media content in general can be influenced by broader political and cultural forces. As a good example of this critical perspective here mention may be made of Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media* (1988) co-authored with Edward S. Herman. Though Chomsky was presenting a critical media theory based on the political-economy approach but, it has strong relevance in the field of public opinion research dealing with the interplay between media effects and public opinion. By analysing the accounts of various media analysts like, W. Lance Bennett, Ben Bagdikian, in this book they argued that, the public was managed and mobilized from above, by means of the media's highly selective and persuasive messages and evasions thereby making them unable to communicate meaningfully through the media in response to those messages[21]. In such a context leaders have usurped enormous amounts of political power and reduced popular control over the political system by using the media to generate support, compliance, and just plain confusion among the public.

Their main concern was that, how the media typically provided their own independent contribution in this process even without being "used"[22]. They observed that, the institutional bias of the private mass media does not merely

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[17] Noelle-Neumann Elisabeth, "Return to the concept of powerful mass media", *Studies in Broadcasting*, Vol: 9, 1973, pp 67–112; Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, "Turbulences in the climate of opinion: Methodological applications of spiral of silence theory", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol: 41, 1977, pp143–158.

[18] Noelle-Neumann Elisabeth, *The Spiral Of Silence: Public Opinion-Our Social Skin*, University Of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1993, pp 137-142.

[19] *Ibid*, pp 146-147.

[20] Scheufele A. Dietram., "Spiral of Silence Theory", Donsbach and Michael W. Traugott (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research*, Sage publications, 2007, pp 176-177.

[21] Chomsky Noam & Edward S Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of Mass Media*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1988, p 303.

[22] *Ibid*, p 303.

protect the corporate system but also robs the public of a chance to understand the real world. Summing up their analysis, it's discernible that, the mass media are effective and powerful ideological institutions carrying out a system-supportive propaganda function relying on market forces, internalized assumptions and self-censorship, and without significant overt coercion[23]. Such a system has become even more efficient in recent decades with the rise of the national television networks, greater mass-media concentration, right-wing pressures on public radio and television, and the growth in scope and sophistication of public relations and news management. But, the fact that a democratic political order requires far wider control of and access to the media and efforts in this regard should be high on progressive agendas.

Now, what exactly did Chomsky have in mind by the term 'manufacturing consent'? As an answer reference may be made to an interview held between Chomsky and Harry Kreisler at Institute of International Studies, UC, Berkeley in 2002, where, he stated that, term manufacturing consent meaning the framing of issues, was not his own, rather he took it from Walter Lippmann, whom he considered to be the leading public intellectual and media figure of the 20th century. Drawing on Lippmann he said that, democracies should by way of manufacturing consent which means that, there should be a small group of powerful people, and the rest of the population should be spectators, and you should force them to consent by controlling, regimenting their minds[24]. The manipulation of news choices and program schedules became a tool of manipulating public opinion.

III

The phenomenon of commercialisation of the media and the commodification of the media messages or products as leading to the construction or manufacturing of public opinion as a method of garnering consensus has long been stressed by Lippmann, and well documented by later scholars like, Ben Bagdikian, Herman and Chomsky. The above mentioned studies and theorisations imply that, the media cannot be seen as simply reflecting what is happening around them and hence the presence of a free media serving as the watch dog of democracy enhancing informed public knowledge essential for genuine public opinion formation comes under scrutiny. This affects the fact of public knowledge and public participation emphasising on the role of the media in manufacturing or constructing reality making Lippmann's assertion of the distinction between the world of actual events and the public's mediated knowledge based on mediatised information all the more relevant.

Thus, in this context it must be noted that, modern large-scale democracies are characterised by complexities of communication between the public and its leaders predominantly through the mass media. However, the complexity of the process springs from the fact that, the mass media are not merely a conduit of information rather they simultaneously reflect a society's values, norms, concerns, and interests on the one hand while being active participants in the construction of messages and the larger democratic process on the other. The maturing of mass democracy has gone hand-in-hand with developments in the mass media as a key player in the organisation of public life and opinion formation on issues that concern the citizenry[25]. Thus, the mass media not only characterise the distribution of public opinion but are also actively involved in shaping or forming public opinion. And what makes it more significant in public opinion formation is its representation function by virtue of which it presents a constructed form of reality. However, its undeniable that the relationship between the mass media and public opinion is well entrenched in the formation of public opinion, but it's not an unilineal relationship.

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[23] *Ibid*, p 306.

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