What Impact Do The Mass Media Have On Modern Government And Politics. Essay, Research Paper

The mass media is now a global phenomena and has revolutionised the way individuals communicate with each other and receive information. In this essay I will examine the three forms of mass media – newspaper, radio and television – and the way they have evolved. I will explain the three main theories relating to the impact of mass media on the public. I will then discuss how media has altered the emphasis of government at election time and on a day-to-day basis. The term ‘mass media’ embraces all kinds of information sources, such as books, pamphlets, mail circulars and films. The three principle sources of political information are however television, radio and newspapers. The mass media is a recent innovation which has reformed the way politics and government operates. “Without newspapers, radio and pre-eminently television, the present political system could not work. The media are so omnipotent and all-pervasive we are often unaware of the addictive hold they exert over our attention and the messages they implant in our consciousness on a whole range of matters.” Television is widely seen as the most important of the three mediums, and radio the least. In a survey relating to the 1983 British election, television was cited as the most important media source by 63% of respondents, newspapers by 29% and radio by 4%. Prior to mass media, communications was mainly verbal, between small groups, or by the church or political groups such as the Diggers or Levellers. The first medium to come about was newspapers at the end of the Nineteenth Century. These were largely unregulated and free to offer opinions and be openly biased. By the mid-Twentieth century, radio had begun to take over as the main source of information. Hitler was the first politician to exploit the potential of radio. In the United States and Great Britain, Roosevelt and Baldwin introduced the medium in a more gentle fashion. Radio was the much used medium during the war with things such as Churchill’s speeches. Television begun to make an appearance during the war, used to show films reinforcing patriotism and resistance. After the war, television took over as the main medium. Nixons’ ‘Checkers speech’ in 1952 is seen as the beginning of the television revolution. Ironically, television was Nixons downfall in 1960 in the first televised debate, it showed that appearance on television is as important as the message. There are three broad arguments concerning the effects of the mass media on the public and therefore government and politics – opinion forming, opinion reinforcing, and no effects. The opinion forming argument believes that the media shape opinions held by the viewer, since the media chooses the agenda, it also shapes what issues are thought about. This view depicts the viewer as having no or few opinions before media exposure and then accepts the arguments and opinions put forward. The opinion reinforcing argument believes that the viewer will be more likely to accept opinions similar to their own, than to change their opinion as a result of the exposure to the media. “Persuasive communication functions far more frequently as an agent of reinforcement than as an agent of change.” The no effects argument is a ‘minimal effects’ approach, based on research of the elections in the 1940s and 50s. It concludes that change in voting is not compatible with media influence. It appears that this study did little to look at other influences, such as partisanship or an individuals background. The strongest idea seems to be a mixture of reinforcement and opinion forming. In reinforcement theory, when people are exposed to the media reporting of politics, they are more likely to be confirmed in their existing beliefs than to be swayed and take on new ideas. This argument is supplemented by the idea that people are able to filter information. The three characteristics of filtering are selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention. Selective exposure describes how many people avoid politics altogether, while others interested in politics will favour newspapers, television or radio programmes which reflect rather than challenge their views. Selective perception refers to the views and values which people use to ‘edit’ information, accepting that which they identify with and rejecting that which they do not. Selective retention is the same process as perception but refers to what people remember. This process of filtering appears most identifiable in those who read newspapers in the United Kingdom, probably because newspapers are seen as the most biased and there is a large selection of them. The main distinction between reinforcement theory and the opinion forming argument is to whether a person has any pre-disposed ideas before media influence or if they are tabular rasa – blank, with no preconceptions. The opinion forming argument would state that all individuals must originally receive the information to base opinions on from somewhere – which is the role of the media. It also points out that the reinforcement theory does not seem to make sense in an age when party preferences have weakened and people are voting much more according to issues which they have learnt about through the media. It also asks that if the media only reinforces ideas and cannot form or change opinions, why do political parties persist in spending large sums of money in the media to get elected? Furthermore, why do some states feel it necessary to censor information not consistent with their ideology? The reinforcement theory argues that people are capable of forming their own ideas based on the filtering process – they will identify with a given idea and then further exposure reinforces it. Individuals are never completely tabular rasa as this filtering process already exists. “The political predispositions and group allegiances set the goal; all that is read and heard becomes helpful and effective insofar as it guides the voter to his already ‘chose’ destination.” Blumler argues that both reinforcing and opinion forming ideas are at work, albeit with different people. He divides people into two categories, those interested in politics and those not. Those with an interest in politics have some underlying party allegiance and so will receive media information and filter out parts they do not agree with. With those with an interest in politics, reinforcement theory is more applicable. Those with no interest in politics are far less likely to have an underlying political allegiance and so will either filter out less or none of the media’s message, so they are more responsive to the mass media. The problem for the media is to be able to gain the attention of the uninterested and get them to listen to the ideas. So for example, it can be masqueraded as entertainment or comedy – such as the Red Wedge comedians in the 1980s who based their acts on a pro-labour party platform. This type of media is obviously opinion forming in intention but frequently, it is not able to change opinions as it falls ‘on deaf ears.’ In short, mass communications are “an inefficient technique for changing beliefs and behaviour,” because, “the message tends largely to be received by those who are already sympathetic to it and therefore least in need of change,” and, “… for the remainder of the population the message is ignored, ‘crowded out’, by other more potent communications.” The questions of why governments spend money on electoral campaigns and why others censor information set in the explanation of opinion forming theory can now be addressed. In response to the former, it seems governments advertise their policies as a way of trying to reach the uninterested or convince interested supporters who may be ‘floating’ between the two parties and so prepared to listen to any communications. A response to the latter question appears harder. An argument could be made that those interested in hearing the communications are receptive to the information censored and would act if the information was available. Whilst the information is censored, there is no stimulus for action and so the government remains in power. The example of the collapse of the Soviet Union can be used to demonstrate the effects of the mass media being allowed to print what they wish after a long period of censorship. Berlatsky argues that the media held an important role, “liberalism began to erode the Soviet system from inside and our press played all but the decisive role in the subsequent emergence of Perestroika.” If Burlatsky’s argument is accepted, then the press was a main cause in the downfall of communism, then Gorbachev and finally the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the Soviet Union, once free from censorship, the press were allowed to print all the ideas and opinions which the public were receptive to but were previously not allowed to have. Following the information being made available, the public acted upon it and enacted change. In this instance, the media formed the opinions of those who did not have previous knowledge and reinforced the beliefs of those who did. This example shows what could occur if the press is not censored by a government who perceive it as a threat. It is interesting to note that during the failed coup of 1991, the press were once again censored. The media so far has been portrayed as a passive actor in the political world. It must be remembered that those in the media also have objectives to achieve: they must maximise their selling potential to increase profits, they may also subscribe to a particular ideology or set of ideas which it promotes in its reporting. These factors could be seen to lead to the media reporting in a biased way and not been totally impartial and factual. This, if the opinion-forming and reinforcing theories are considered, means that the public will hold views which are skewed without them realising. This point further emphasises the impact that the mass media have on government and politics and the potential it has to alter the outcomes of political events. If it is accepted that the mass media have an effect on modern government and politics via the opinion forming and reinforcing of ideas, then it is necessary to examine what these effects are. There seems two distinct times to divide government action into: at election time, and day-to-day running. In the United States, electoral campaigning has incorporated audio-visual tools since 1952 and has altered the way elections are fought. In 1952, Eisenhower employed Thomas Rosser Reeves Jr who was a marketing pioneer. He simplified ‘Ikes’ message so it was more understandable on the television and radio. He requested that Eisenhower never develop more than one category of arguments in any single speech, press conference or television appearance. Eisenhower also tried to make himself look younger and use speech notes rather than a fully written text. The democrats’ strategy with Stevenson was to have quantity rather than quality, unfortunately, all his half-hour broadcasts were shown late at night and so not many people ever watched them. The then candidate for the Vice-presidency, Nixon, made the ‘checkers speech’ and firmly established television as a powerful political medium, 1956 saw the use of short advertising spots and negative campaigning. Based on the experience of 1952 election, this new strategy seemed more appealing to the public and has remained since. 1960, and the emergence of a candidate prepared to take acting lessons and a speechwriter, Kennedy came to victory with the “model campaign.” The first televised debate between Nixon and Kennedy is said by some to have made the difference between Kennedy winning and Nixon not. The first debate was watched by 70-75 million voters, Nixon had a knee inflammation and was physically worn down. Kennedy looked younger, tanned and more at ease on the screen. Nixons make-up also made him look like he had not been bothered to shave. “Since Nixon missed the presidency by less than 100,000 votes, a ridiculously narrow margin on the scale of the United States, the first debate has generally been considered as the reason for his failure.” The campaign emphasises a shift from the public voting on issues and taking more notice of presentation and style. This shift to perception together with a simplification of the message can be attributed to the influence of the Mass Media. The campaigns after 1980 have taken on other characteristics such as the use of the photo opportunity – the candidate shown in a particular situation, for example, riding a horse or walking to or from a vehicle. However, the media is becoming more expensive. Since 1980, nearly half of federal campaign budgets for presidential elections have been spent on buying television airtime. The reliance on television and its high costs has led the way for the likes of Steve Forbes (1996) and Ross Perot (1992) to become involved in Presidential elections without having a firm political base (for example, party or faction backing, political experience, or prior knowledge). Wealth has become a barrier to anyone wishing to become elected and a way for the rich to have a go. Negative campaigning in the 1980s went on more, the Bush campaigns of 1988 and 1992 were, “ruthless, relying on vehement negative spots.” The aim to deflect attention away from on candidate, and emphasise a trait or past experience of the other candidate which is likely to discourage voters from electing him. Although it worked for Bush in 1988, it had less affect against Bill Clinton. With day-to-day effects of the media, another American example – Ronald Reagan – shows how the right person can adapt and use the media to their advantage. Ronald Reagan was President from 1981 until 1989 and was the first President to complete the two full terms since Eisenhower (1953-1961). He came to the post with no experience of Washington, “He was an ex-actor, an ex-professional after dinner speaker. He had no direct experience of national government before becoming President, and he had no experience of international politics.” His use of photo opportunities, stage managed presentations and speeches broadcast by the media greatly enhanced his popularity and his ability to govern. Richard Neustadt comments that Reagans’ background in acting, use of charm, ability to appear concerned and dominate conversations with anecdotes which filled up time and prevented heated debates, raised his popularity and prestige with the public. ‘The Great Communicator’ together with his Director of Communications managed to manipulate the media to their advantage. The advancement of technology, allowing live coverage of any event, allowed Reagan to be packaged in such a way so that he would be shown in a preferential light by the news hungry journalists. He also ‘appealed to the people’ in prepared speeches, attempting to mobilise the public with varying success; early on having a bigger impact than later on. The media with Reagan appeared to have an immediate impact which diminished over time. Reagans’ persona and manipulation of the media allowed him to come to power and remain fairly popular. Without the media, it seems hard to imagine the ex-actor gaining power or passing the amount of legislation he managed to do. The mass media has had an enormous impact on government and politics. It appears that the media reinforces the opinions of some and forms the opinions of others. Using the examples of the USSR and USA, the media can be seen to have a direct impact in the way electoral campaigns are held and the day-to-day running of government. More emphasis is placed on the media by politicians and this leads them to incorporate it into their routine and try to use it to their advantage. The three theories discussed in relation to the effects of the media have different levels of credibility, the no-impact theory appears to lack any value, whereas the opinion-forming and reinforcing can be both argued to work. This has led some like Blumler to conclude that both are working, but on different people. The media has seen a rapid expansion over the last half of the twentieth century, particularly with television, it now shapes how government is presented to the public and therefore forces the government to accept the media and attempt to manipulate it to their advantage. As the example of the USA shows, it has caused speeches to become simpler, more focused on a single issue and be packaged in the correct way. The example of the USSR shows what can occur if the press are allowed to print what they will against a previously oppressive regime. What will occur to the media in the future is not known, but it can be certain that it will continue to have an impact. 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