

37 Communications Media and the Democratic Process

The Role of the Press, Television, Radio, and the Internet in a Democracy

A wise observer of human affairs once said that, "Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely" (Lord Herbert Acton, nineteenth century). Democracy incorporates this wisdom in various ways. One means of limiting power is by giving free rein to the media of mass communications ("the media") to watch those in power and report their actions to the public. The threat of exposure by the media often deters those in power from ill behavior. When ill behavior nevertheless occurs, public exposure by the media is the essential prerequisite to correcting it.

The media are sometimes called "the fourth branch of government," after the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. The media can be powerful indeed, drumming up support for wars, for political reform, for removal of officials from public office, and other causes. Some segments of the media, however, do not always behave well, playing on popular emotion or failing to inform or misinforming the public. Thus, a vigilant public must be on guard against excessive trust in what they find in the media, just as they must not place complete and unskeptical trust in the institutions of government.

Finally, it must be remembered that the word "media" is plural, not singular. The media are not a single entity that "does" things. Rather, in developed democracies, the media are a diverse array of sources of information, analysis, and commentary that compete in the marketplace of ideas for viewers, listeners, and readers. Even the developing democratic African nation of Mali, for example, has more than 100 independent radio stations.

- **The media and "transparency"** Through a variety of means, democracies attempt to ensure that there is no "absolute" power in their political systems. One of these means is to ensure that all centers of power are capable of being closely watched—that the conduct of the affairs of state to a large degree are "transparent." This means that secrecy in public affairs must be kept to an absolute minimum; public affairs must be open to public view. Examples include:
 - ▶ Court proceedings open to the public
 - ▶ Lawmaking processes open to the public
 - ▶ Hearings regarding public affairs that are open to the public
- **Linking government with the public** The media of mass communications provide an essential link between the conduct of government affairs and the public.
 - ▶ Through the media, the public is able to "see" and experience the conduct of public affairs and therefore form judgments about the performance of public officials essential for choosing public officials and political parties at elections.
 - ▶ Without full media exposure of public affairs, modern representative democracy, in which the People often cannot participate directly in the formation of public policy, cannot operate effectively.

- ▶ For democracy to be meaningful, citizens must have the means to become accurately informed of essential information in order to come to public judgment of government's performance.
- **Necessity of media independence and plurality** To fulfill their function as watchdogs over public affairs, ensuring that poor policy decisions, inept and inefficient administration, and corruption are exposed to public view, the media must have certain characteristics. Information is the currency of democracy and it must circulate freely for democracy to function fully.
 - ▶ Since radio and (especially) television are the most immediate and powerful public information media, it is essential that neither government nor its allies hold a monopoly over ownership and management of radio and television stations. It is essential to the democratic process that there be radio and television stations completely independent of government control, threat, or manipulation.
 - ▶ Print media have the same requirement. There must be a wide variety of points of view, including those critical of or hostile to the government of the day, represented in newspapers, magazines, and journals that are freely available at reasonable prices to the public.
 - ▶ With certain exceptions, government in a democracy must not attempt to control the content of the Internet. Examples of exceptions include child pornography and certain sensitive materials that affect national security, such as information classified as secret.
 - ▶ Government must not be able to control or intimidate any of the information media.
 - ▶ Law must ensure the complete, unfettered freedom of the press to function as public watchdog. For example, libel laws should not be available either to government or public individuals as a means to wrongly intimidate, punish, or otherwise muzzle any of the media.
 - ▶ Freedom of political speech and the press require and demand that both religious and secular perspectives be freely aired to the public.
- **Citizen responsibility and the media**
Democratic citizens have responsibilities respecting the media.
 - ▶ Citizens have an obligation to use the media of their choice to inform themselves about public affairs.
 - ▶ Citizens should be aware that *multiple sources of information* are more likely to give them a full and balanced picture of public affairs than only one or a few sources that reinforce preconceived ideas.
 - ▶ Citizens have an obligation to raise their voices against attempts to stifle or threaten media critical of government, except those advocating violence and/or the overthrow of democracy.

■ **Imperfections of the media**

Media in a democracy are subject to a number of imperfections.

- ▶ Media outlets such as newspapers and television stations may be and often are politically biased in how they report the news.
- ▶ The choice of subject matter of the news may be selective, according to the political leaning of a newspaper, radio or television station, or news magazine.
- ▶ Stories may be slanted in one way or another; and newspaper headlines may reflect bias toward the political left or right or toward one social class over others. Where a story appears in a newspaper—on the front page or buried deep inside—may also reflect bias.
- ▶ Media outlets may be subject to financial or political pressures.
- ▶ Self-interested individuals or groups seeking to sway public opinion rather than faithfully reporting the news in an even-handed manner may also control media outlets.

- **Regarding the media** as much as government itself, citizens should bear in mind the adage, *“The price of liberty is eternal vigilance.”*

What do you think?

- 1 What are the principal functions of the media of mass communications in a democracy?
- 2 How can effective media promote the transparency and accountability of government? Why are government transparency and accountability necessary features of democracy?
- 3 Why are the independence and plurality of the media necessary for democracy?
- 4 In what ways are the media imperfect, and what can citizens do to cope with these imperfections?
- 5 What is the relationship between the use of the media and citizens’ fulfillment of their civic responsibilities?