Media Relations and Democracy  
An analysis of communication through media relations practice and its role in liberal democratic societies

Introduction

Whilst most academic writing on media focuses on the role that the media play in influencing society, this paper explores how media content is itself shaped by the practice of media relations, and the impact this has on society.

Through a theoretical discussion reviewing different approaches to the role of the media, the meaning and purpose of the media institutions within liberal democratic societies are examined. In particular, two models are analysed in order to understand its relationship with society.

The first proposes a view of the media as constructors of our values; this makes clear their direct effect on our actions. They act as a mirror of society and can be used as a tool to understand its functioning. The second model suggests that the media do not directly affect society but they rather reflect its realities, values and norms (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2008).

After an introduction to the main ideas stemming from different communication models, media relations is then reviewed through a discussion of the main theories surrounding its practice. These mainly refer to the concepts of framing, information subsidies and agenda-building, which highlight the close relationship that links journalists to media relations agents.

Finally, two case studies are discussed to illustrate the impact that media relations can have when effectively practiced. The first one highlights the requirement for the media to comply with the standards of news production, and describes how Greenpeace succeeded in bringing a complex environmental issue onto the media agenda. The second makes obvious the importance that the practice of media relations has in democracy building processes through its goal of conveying specific messages via the media. In particular, this example recounts how NGOs in post-conflict Bosnia have successfully engaged civil society in processes of reconstruction and reconciliation through the use of mass media as a communication channel.

The role of the media within society

As McQuail (2000) explains, a topic that is often recurrent in media literature involves the view that the media institution deals primarily with the production and distribution of knowledge. This knowledge produced by the media allows us to provide our experience of the social world with particular meanings. All the
information offered to us by the media, including images and sounds, is in fact what help individuals learn about both their past – history - and their present social location – thus their identity (McQuail, 2000). Therefore the media largely work on the development of our perceptions and definitions of social reality and of what we refer to as ‘normal’, and are a source of models and norms to be followed. These considerations define the concept of mediation of contact with social reality (ibid.).

According to O’Shaughnessy and Stadler (2008) the media ‘make sense of the world for us’ (p.34). The authors identify three central processes that the media carry out:

- **Representation** – they represent the primary source through which we become aware of the world;
- **Interpretation** – in their representation they provide an understanding of the events occurring;
- **Evaluation** – they value and devalue different issues and identities, thus offering an evaluative framework (O’Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2008).

In so doing, the media create patterns through which we see ourselves and others, but we also make sense of issues such as gender, race as well as national, cultural and religious identities (ibid.).

Through the elaboration of the *agenda setting* theory, McCombs et al. (1997) explain how the topics selected by the media for their agenda progressively become part of the audience agenda too, thus creating a ‘public agenda’. However, as McQuail (2000) rightly argues, the process of mediation of reality offered by the media involves different routes: firstly, it involves the reporting of events and conditions that we cannot directly observe, and therefore come to us through the version offered by a third party; secondly, it refers to the attempts that other actors and institutions in society make to contact us for their own purposes. This shows how agenda setting is yet another method used by the media to define our reality (McCombs et al., 1997).

A theoretical approach that can be opposed to this perspective is given by the liberal paradigm. Liberal critics believe that, rather than mediating, the media offers a reflection of society. This means that the information is selected and presented as news within socially constructed frameworks of meaning. News items are understood through the ‘symbolic system’ elaborated by a society; this system is made up of the concepts, images and assumptions that are part of the cultural tradition of the social group. Since the news is also structured by the genre conventions of news reporting - which vary in different societies and evolve over time - in this view news is shaped by the societal culture in which it is processed (Curran, 2002).

As Watson (2008) emphasises, the version of reality offered to us by the news carries a cultural bias from its very beginning, and is conditioned by the specifics of the situation. However, what the liberal perspective importantly recognises is that the
news we receive is the result of several factors; these revolve around organizational processes and requirements, journalists’ sources and methods of news-gathering, and the public relations management (Curran, 2002).

Watson (2008) also explains that the media are considered as authoritative judges of our actions: they ‘speak society’s lines’ and regard themselves as the community’s conscience, while simultaneously act as an agency of order. The author claims that - to a different extent - all societies *enculturalise* those who are part of them and they do so by implanting those social values that have given rise to acceptable patterns of behaviour in accordance to the society’s norms or rules. Language is the main tool by which these values and norms are established and spread, and the media are an effective means of communicating it. As a result, if those whose words can reach the largest number of people have the potential to hold the greatest control, the media represent a contended channel (Watson, 2008).

From a sociological point of view, the functionalist framework formulated by Lasswell (1948, in McQuail, 2000, p.46) helps us to understand the ‘function’ of mass communication in society. The functional analysis assumes that the essential task performed by communication for the maintenance of society is working toward integration, continuity and normality.

As Lasswell (1948, p.51) explains, the communication has the triple role of:
1. *surveillance* of the environment, disclosing threats and opportunities for the society and components of it;
2. *correlation* of the components of society in providing a response to the environment;
3. *transmission* of the social inheritance.

The author also adds that in democratic societies, rational choices depend on the concept of *equivalent enlightenment*. This is regarded as the information that is acquired by individuals from an external source and that does not always consist of perfect knowledge, as the degree of expertise of the source varies. This is based again upon communication (Lasswell, 1948).

The functionalist approach relates to the concept of ‘public interest’ characterising democracy, which – as explained by Stankiewicz (1976) - many have defined as ‘the sum of private interests’ (p.33). According to McQuail (2000), this concept should be an attribute of the media performance. Specifically, the media system should operate on the basis of the same principles governing the rest of society, in particular with reference to justice, fairness, cultural values, and democracy.

Also the social theory framework offers the principles of a media system that is expected to serve society for its general benefit, and which prioritises political and social/cultural goals over organizational goals. On the grounds of this theory, media
performance should be assessed on the quality of the information provided, especially in relation to independent thought, diversity, and social/cultural order (McCann, 2008).

In particular – as stressed by McCann (2008) - promoting media diversity in a society is fundamental, as it allows citizens to make more informed decisions and gives the opportunity to different groups to maintain their distinctive identities in a larger society. This can be regarded as a further contribution that the media make towards the successful functioning of a liberal democracy, as they work to facilitate the mutual understanding of differing standpoints (ibid.).

**The role of the media in the communication process**

One of the first models that attempted to offer an analysis of the communication process was the one developed by Shannon and Weaver in 1949. This model primarily looked at the technical effectiveness of communication channels to carry information (McQuail, 2000). The model analysed communication as a sequential process that can be represented as follows:

![Shannon and Weaver communication model](image)

**Fig.1: Shannon and Weaver communication model**

The Shannon and Weaver model was not initially concerned with mass communication, but it primarily referred to human communication. However, it soon became clear how it could be useful to explain some of the mechanisms characterising the media. Most communication is in fact mediated and gets filtered through other channels (McQuail, 2000).

Yet, over the years several researchers have demonstrated how such a simple transmission model cannot function in all communication processes, and have identified the following technical gaps:

- signals may reach unintended recipients;
- messages can be decoded in a way that differs from their original meaning;
- the noise affecting the channel may cause unplanned effects on the message (McQuail, 2000).

From this perspective, Westley and MacLean (1957, quoted in McQuail, 2000) went a step forward by creating a new model that acknowledges the role of the ‘communicator’ – such as the journalist - between ‘society’ and ‘audience’. The sequence changes therefore from (1) message – (2) sender – (3) channel – (4) receiver to (1) events and voices in society – (2) channel/communicator role – (3) messages – (4) receivers. This version takes into account the fact that the message is not always originated by the communicator, who can give access to the views and voices of some of those who want to reach wider publics (McQuail, 2000).

This new transmission model makes clear how the media are sought out by institutional channels to convey their perspectives on events to the general public. This implies that, deliberately or not, the media often take on the role of agents of other sources (McQuail, 2000).

Neuzil and Kovarik (1996) argue that all communication processes are characterised by a control function. A key assumption underlying this argument is that knowledge is the basis for social power: the control of knowledge is in fact central to the development and maintenance of power within a society. Given their crucial role in the communication process, the media become a fundamental instrument and can be seen as a system that at times may control and be controlled by other subsystems (ibid.).

Street (2001) adds that as far as knowledge is associated to power, the ability of the media to present or withhold information makes them part of an exercise of power. What needs to be highlighted is that – when looked at in practical terms - the actual source of power is not the media themselves but rather those who have access to them.

Within this state of affairs, also De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) have identified as the power of the media system, its control over resources that individuals, groups and organizations depend upon to achieve their goals. Through their media dependency theory the authors highlight how – in order to live in a society – individuals, groups and organisations seeking to reach their personal or collective objectives, are left to make use of resources that other people, groups, or organisations control, and vice versa. Yet, De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) also underline the fact that this dependency relationship is not one way. It involves not only how others depend upon the resources of the media to achieve their objectives, but also how the media system depends upon the resources controlled by others. Thus, as the authors state, ‘the media dependency theory is, by definition, a relation of interdependence’ (p.319).
So from this perspective, ‘mass media are not the source, but rather the selective interpretation taken from the originating sources’ (Davis, 2004, p.163). The aim of those sources is to convey messages that will hone the result of their activities (ibid.). Within this context, for an effective management of the supply of source material, the mass communicator has to cope with the strong pressure exerted by different actors in their function of external informants. What takes place is a process that McQuail (2000) refers to as struggle for communicative advantage. In a liberal democracy, media are expected to allow representation of diverse views and portray a variety of experiences. This is also accompanied by scrutiny and correction where a lack of accuracy occurs (Street, 2001).

**Gaining access to the media: the practice of media relations**

The 1940s brought a shift in media theory, which was reflected in the realisation that the audience does not take a passive stance when exposed to the information passed on by the media, but engage with a selection of content and messages according to their needs. In particular, the uses and gratifications approach was developed in an effort to provide a meaning to the mass media consumption. In line with this theory, individuals choose different categories of media content on the basis of the satisfactions the media are able to offer them (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989). As a consequence, the news values that Price (1993) defines as ‘the assumptions forming the ideological background to the work of journalists and news editors’ (p.218) can be regarded as the categorization of the audience preferences that are established by the media internal organization (Price, 1993).

Effective media relations has been widely identified as ‘a knowledge creation process, involving valuable strategies to meet media expectations, gain credibility and legitimate critical knowledge’ (Motion and Weaver, 2004, p.247). What makes a media relations strategy effective is the ability to create and make available to journalists and editors messages that are so efficiently formulated and meet the time constraints of the media involved that they will be put out with minimal alteration. This implies that the sender retains a great degree of control on the information, and that the news can take advantage of the added-value provided by the media endorsement. As Davis (2004) claims,

“there is something of a gamble about communication via the media, and it is the elimination of this hazard that drives media relations practice” (p.163)

Where the main reason any organisation has to gain media coverage is to become visible to a larger audience or to a target group, the goal of the media relations practitioners is to gain the interest of the public media by making a story attractive to their producers (Motion and Weaver, 2004). As previously highlighted, the story needs to stand out amongst the others for its news-worthiness. Journalists are more likely to turn to sources who demonstrate knowledge of how news is to be framed to
attract audiences. In particular – as Price (1993) underlines - events that can be represented in terms of human interest and that are characterised by a negative angle appear to be more likely to gain media attention. As Motion and Weaver (2004) clarify, ‘news doesn’t always just happen, it frequently has to be created’ (p.247).

Also for advocacy and non-profit organisations media relations is a crucial activity, as it helps to convey particular knowledge that permits to raise public awareness, influence public opinion and gain support and interests for particular causes (Motion and Weaver, 2004).

Zoch and Molleda (2006) identify three important theoretical frameworks to contextualise the practice of media relations (p.280):

• the *framing* theory – the message framer has the choice of what is to be emphasised in the message.

Framing involves selecting a specific standpoint to put the information into a certain context. Culture or social norms are typically used to create frames that are acceptable within a given society or group of people. Thus when supplying information material to the media, the media relations practitioner has to position such material within the social frame that guarantees its relevance; at the same time, he/she needs to offer a central story line that gives structure and meaning to the issue or event (Zoch and Molleda, 2006).

As Stanton (2007) states:

“Framing theory is the capacity of a media relationship builder to comprehend and interpret the agenda-setting policies and source selection processes employed by the media. It is the construction of a suitable ground onto which an issue or event can be projected as en elegant story [...] relevant to specific stakeholders” (p.18).

Through frames, journalists can handle large amounts of information more effectively and they can tie it together so that the issue meets the audience’s interest. Media frames thus take into account not just the topic, but how the journalist can cover and package an issue. The media relations practitioner holds therefore the power to highlight or withhold specific information about the issue from those covering the story (Zoch and Molleda, 2006).

• the concept of *information subsidies* – media relations practitioners produce pre-packaged information to promote their organisation’s stance on an issue and to communicate elements within that issue that are relevant to their publics.
The expression ‘information subsides’ was coined by Gandy (1982, quoted in Zoch and Molleda, 2006) in reference to the pre-packaged information offered to journalists which represents “ready to use” material and simplifies the newsgathering process of media organisations. The suppliers of information subsides clearly detain a greater degree of control on the material presented.

Gandy (1982, quoted in Zoch and Molleda, 2006) also adds that ‘subsidised information could decrease or increase its value depending on how well disguised the quality of self-interest of the information is, how credible the sources are, and how diverse the available competing information is’ (p.285).

- the agenda-building paradigm - while the agenda setting theory provides an account on how reality is shaped by the decisions made by editors, reporters and broadcasters in choosing and reporting certain issues and events rather than others, it is important to remember that the media agenda is in actual fact built by a number of different actors. Here is where media relations plays a vital role.

According to Davis (2002) two approaches have emerged: one attempts to assess how much news content originates primarily from PR activities; the other investigates how much news is instead generated through proactive journalism. While the latter focuses on ‘conscious control’ trying to distinguish who is in charge and who is setting the agenda, a study conducted by the author in reference to the first approach has found that for several journalists, selecting and utilizing PR outputs is still regarded as a valid method of news-gathering. A large amount of news is fed in by external sources; however, this can still be considered valuable and worth follow up (Davis, 2002).

“In terms of control one might argue that the power relationships are governed by the law of supply and demand [...]. [...] (Thus) the more in demand a source of journalist, the more power they are likely to have in their relations” (Davis, 2002, p.32).

However, the author also recognises that journalists and media relations practitioners in all probability work together in a tensed relationship. Despite the occurring power balance, the production of news involves a process that can only develop through a regular long-term working relationship between the two actors (Davis, 2002).

Those who supply information subsidies share the same vital activity of effectively researching their targets as journalists research their stories. While journalists identify their sources and perform the role of public guardians, media relations
practitioners look for journalists and carry out the function of source guardians (Davis, 2002).

The importance of complying with media standards: Greenpeace against GMOs

A relevant example of the relationship between journalists and media relations practitioners is represented by the successful media campaign implemented by Greenpeace in New Zealand, in occasion of a moratorium to release genetically modified organism (GMOs). The campaign was analysed by Motion and Weaver (2005) in their article ‘The Epistemic Struggle for Credibility: rethinking Media Relations’.

Gaining media coverage is an essential part of Greenpeace's strategies for raising public awareness and developing an understanding of environmental issues. This subsequently aims at influencing public opinion to lobby corporate and political decision makers. In this particular case study, the organisation handled an issue that was perceived as tiresome and complex such as that of GMOs. They had therefore to contend with significant pressure in order to supply stories that would interest the audience (Motion and Weaver, 2005).

According to the media analysis conducted by Motion and Weaver (2005), the organisation strategically advanced an informed spokesperson who worked proactively with journalists to increase their knowledge on the GM issues. The spokesperson provided journalists with accurate information while simultaneously promoting Greenpeace’s claims. The organisation was thus acknowledged as an agenda-setting agent in the media coverage thanks to its ability to offer leads on a story. The group took an effective strategic approach, providing quality information while framing a story to meet commercial news values. As the authors explain, ‘it adopted an ideological frame of environmental and consumer advocacy, and took on a stance against activities that could be seen as destructive or counter to the interests of the environment. In so doing, the group met the negativity value and included entertainment through the exploitation of drama and emotion’ (p.253).

At the same time, Greenpeace engaged in the successful circulation of critical knowledge on genetic modification and led society into considerations on the scientific controversy. This brought an increased public engagement and democratisation of science (Motion and Weaver, 2005).

The impact that the Greenpeace campaign had on New Zealand’s population, which arose thanks to the coverage obtained on the news, can therefore be explained in terms of media effect. Neuzil and Kovarik (1996) stress how media performance ‘accelerate’ or ‘decelerate’ social problems. The media seem in fact to add public legitimacy to a story, especially when the issue and the actors involved are in
harmony with the values of the social system. This also relates to the idea of agenda setting (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1989). As McCombs et al. (1997) emphasise, in most modern democracies, the subjects that are touched upon by the mass media succeed in influencing the importance the public gives to different issues in their reality.

Media relations for democracy-building: the role of the media in post-conflict Bosnia

Stanton (2007) suggests that a field is a ‘site of competition in which agents and other forces compete to keep things as they are or to transform things’ (p.13). The author continues explaining that while the field of journalism is comprised of agents and actors operating as journalists, that of media relations is a field in which different agents and forces operate on behalf of others who belong to fields separate from that of media relations. The media are thus a vehicle for media relations agents that can be employed to reach different stakeholders within the latter field (Stanton, 2007).

Taylor and Kent (2006) point out that an example that clarifies the interaction among differing fields facilitated by the media can be found in the communication process for nation building. In the political science such process is normally viewed merely as a channel and not much importance is placed on the dynamic human process involved. A more effective communication approach to nation building is based on a more sophisticated model that concentrates on the social construction of meanings. Rather than focusing on the content of messages, a communicative approach to nation building works towards shaping the collective consciousness of individuals, groups, communities and the nation, through the use of communication. From this perspective, the primary aim is not that of disseminating a large amount of information but to create, maintain and alter relationships. The authors claim that only when communication is used as an instrument to create and maintain relationships at the national level the state can be regarded as a ‘truly communicative constructed system’ (Taylor and Kent, 2006, p.347).

In addition to what is explained above, in the context of nation building engaging in a dialogue with media representatives enhances the relationship building process that occurs between those organisations working towards the improvement of the situation in a nation (such as non governmental organisations – NGOs) and the various stakeholders who benefit from their activities (Taylor and Kent, 2006).

Taylor and Kent (2006) also put forward the theory of coorientation, which ‘encompasses efforts to come to honest and objective understanding of other groups or organisations’ position and to understand how other groups think about one’s own group or organisation’ (p.353). This brings to the fore the important task of both
individuals and groups to try to understand each others’ definition of reality and events, even when it is not a shared one.

In a nation building context, the approach discussed above is accompanied by a dialogic theory, which looks at the creation of a space for public participation through public forums and open decision making. Thus this theory encompasses the liberal democratic notions that focus on public participation and public voices. Taylor and Kent (2006) explain how an analysis of the dialogic theory in the nation building process can be undertaken by studying the communication structure within a nation, with particular attention being paid to the mass media.

The authors conclude that when both coorientation and dialogue occur between publics and government officials, there is a strong potential for the rise of civil society, described as ‘a system whereby groups and organisations mediate the relationship between citizens and government’ (Taylor and Kent, 2006, p.355). This is a fundamental component for the functioning of democracy.

The democratic notion of public sphere (originally developed by Jürgen Habermas in 1962) relates to that of civil society insofar as it refers to the zone where institutions and citizens come together in their relation with the state. Within this relation, the media can be considered as one of the most important intermediary institutions of the civil society (McQuail, 2000). This highlights their vital democratic function.

According to the public sphere model, in a democracy the media have the responsibility to act as public resources; their role is therefore that of serving public interest and not to operate at the advantage of the corporate sector. This implies that the media should foster active citizenship by providing quality information, education, and promoting social integration. What is offered by the media shapes in fact social, cultural and political views in line with which citizens make democratic decisions (McCann, 2008).

The example discussed by Taylor (2000) in her paper ‘Media Relations in Bosnia: a role for Public Relations in building Civil Society’ demonstrates how the practice of media relations can be extremely valuable for the spread of democratic values and the preservation of civil society.

At the official end of the Civil War in former Yugoslavia, the division of the country into different nations led to the urgent need for a re-establishment of functioning institutions. An important task assigned to humanitarian organizations was that to promote the development of civil social groups; this was essential to circumscribe the power of government and involve individual citizens in decision-making practice. The most important role for the media was thus to assist in the development of organizations that reflected public needs and opinions (Taylor, 2000).
In Bosnia particularly, the social and political situation in which the country reverted at the end of the conflict was a clear sign for the need of civil society activities to foster. Thanks to its function to build peace and democracy, media relations was regarded as an invaluable tool within this context. Bosnian media were considered to be partly responsible for the genocide of the 1990s, when the manipulation applied by the government caused high ethnic tensions; thus the concepts of free press and public communication were now seen as the key elements for the advancement of civil society (Taylor, 2000).

Through its relationship-building function, media relations performs as a mediated communication activity and plays a vital role in civil society initiatives. In order to get their message across, civil society organizations need in fact to reach various publics and to create links between like-minded groups (Taylor, 2000).

As a result, media relations in Bosnia positioned itself as an agent for democracy-building and helped organizations speak with and listen to relevant publics. By making the voices of NGOs heard in the media, an opportunity for creating civil society institutions was provided and public discussion and problem solving were offered before violence. In so doing, media relations proved to be beneficial for Bosnian media and helped those organizations that strove to create civil society. Today, thanks to the support from international humanitarian organisations, Bosnian alternative media are able to offer their audience different perspectives than that of the state media and contribute to the process of democracy-building that is taking place in the country (Taylor, 2000).

As Taylor (2000) concludes:

“A civil society is a place where many voices are heard, many positions debated, and disagreement respected and tolerated. Relationships between NGOs and [...] media outlets are one of the most important ways to ensure this dialogue” (p.11).

**Conclusion**

This article shows how, what is generally referred to as ‘media content’ is in fact the result of the interaction between different actors and the negotiation of several elements characterising the media system. Moreover, it demonstrates how the outcome of this interaction is critical in democratic society.

By discussing different media perspectives in light of the principles of liberal democracy and connecting them to the main approaches to communication, this paper makes clear how the job of the media relations practitioner is intertwined with the one of the journalist in the representation of reality.
The argument is provided with empirical evidence that reinforces the assumption that the practice of media relations plays a significant role in the successful functioning of liberal democracy. The first example put forward confirms the accomplishments achieved by those who have employed valuable media relations techniques and strategically met both media and society requirements. Similarly, the second case study succeeds in positioning effective media relations as a vital tool in the democracy-building process. This is particularly possible through the use that NGOs have made of the media in the advancement of civil society.

Within this context, Watson (2008) asserts that:

“If [...] communication and culture are interchangeable, then we might argue that communication and democracy are equally so: the one creates, support, furthers and protects others. We blur the connection at our peril” (p.390).

References:


