The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change

MEENU

Abstract : The media play a central role in informing the public about what happens in the world, particularly in those areas in which audiences do not possess direct knowledge or experience. This article examines the impact the media has in the construction of public belief and attitudes and its relationship to social change. Drawing on findings from a range of empirical studies, we look at the impact of media coverage in areas such as disability, climate change and economic development. Findings across these areas show the way in which the media shape public debate in terms of setting agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects. For example, in our work on disability we showed the relationship between negative media coverage of people on disability benefit and a hardening of attitudes towards them. Further, we found that the media also severely limit the information with which audiences understand these issues and that alternative solutions to political problems are effectively removed from public debate. We found other evidence of the way in which media coverage can operate to limit understanding of possibilities of social change. In our study of news reporting of climate change, we traced the way that the media have constructed uncertainty around the issue and how this has led to disengagement in relation to possible changes in personal behaviours. Finally, we discuss the implications for communications and policy and how both the traditional and new media might help in the development of better informed public debate.

Keywords: media, social change, policy, climate change, disability, economy

The media – television, the press and online – play a central role in communicating to the public what happens in the world. In those cases in which audiences do not possess direct knowledge or experience of what is happening, they become particularly reliant upon the media to inform them. That is not to say that the media simply tell us what to think – people do not absorb media messages uncritically (Philo, 2008; Philo, Miller, & Happer, in press). But they are key to the setting of agendas and focusing public interest on particular subjects, which operates to limit the range of arguments and perspectives that inform public debate. Drawing on a multi-dimensional model of

the communications process, this article examines the role of the media in the construction of public belief and attitudes and its relationship to social change. We look at this both at the governmental level, in terms of change through policy action, and at the level of the individual, through commitments to behavioural change. Through discussions of findings from a range of empirical studies, we illustrate the ways in which the media shape public debate and input into changes in the pattern of beliefs. The conditions under which people accept or reject a message when they are aware of a range of alternatives are fundamental to this process, and are discussed in depth. We then discuss the ways in which such attitudinal shifts facilitate changes at the level of policy. Finally, we examine the way in which audience beliefs and understandings relate to changes in commitments to alter individual behaviours in their intersection with structural support – and the impact of such changes for wider social change.

Research Context [TOP]

The advent of digital media has shown that the world is made up of a mass of circulating, disjointed, and often contradictory information. An effective flow of information between the various distinct groups in the public sphere has historically been made possible by the mass media, which systematically edit and interpret the mass of information, making some sense of the world for audiences. As certain knowledges have been promoted over others, they have effectively been given the privileged status of being authoritative and, in some cases, truthful (Fairclough, 2003; Glasgow University Media Group, 1976, 1980, 1982; Herman & Chomsky, 1994; Van Dijk, 1998). In terms of shaping content, we argue that a number of privileged groups contribute to the production of media accounts, including social and political institutions and other interest groups such as lobbyists and the public relations industry (Miller & Dinan, 2000, 2009). These different groups intersect to shape the issues open to discussion, but the outcome can also severely limit the information to which audiences have access. The media can effectively remove issues from public discussion. The analysis of media content – of what we are told and not told – is therefore a prime concern. But the relationship of media content to audiences is not singular or one-way. Policymakers, for example, can both feed information into the range of media, and also attempt to anticipate audience response to the manner in which policy is shaped and presented. In addition, they anticipate the way in which their words will be 'mediated' and reproduced in various media

outlets. The key point is therefore that all of the elements involved in the communications circuit intersect and are dynamic. Whilst in past research each element (e.g. content or effects of media) has often been examined separately, we explain here why it is important to analyse the inter-relations of each of these different components in any discussion of the media's role in social change. We begin with media content.

Methods: Content Analysis [TOP]

Our approach is based on the assumption that in any controversial area there will be competing ways of explaining events and their history. These often relate to different political positions and can be seen as ideological if they relate to the legitimation of ways of understanding that are connected to social interests. In this way, ideology (meaning an interest-linked perspective) and the struggle for legitimacy by groups go hand in hand.

Our method begins by setting out the range of available arguments in public discourse on a specific subject. We then analyse the news texts to establish which of these appear and how they do so in the flow of news programming and press coverage. Some may be referenced only occasionally or in passing while others occupy a much more dominant position, being highlighted in news headlines or in interview questions or editorials. In the case of media coverage of migration, some arguments and the assumptions that they contain – for example, that a 'large number' of migrants constitute a 'threat' – may underpin the structure of specific news stories. The story is organised around this way of understanding migration, and the different elements of the story such as interviewees, the information quoted, the selection of images and editorial comment, all work to elaborate and legitimise it as a key theme. In past research we have shown, using this method, that news accounts can and do operate to establish specific ways of understanding (Briant, Philo, & Watson, 2011; Philo, 1996; Philo & Berry, 2004, 2011).

News may appear as a sometimes chaotic flow of information and debate but it is also underpinned by key assumptions about social relationships and how they are to be understood. At the heart of these are beliefs about motivations, cause and effect, responsibility and consequence. So a newspaper report on people seeking asylum might make assumptions on each of these. The 'real' motive for people coming might be posited as them seeking a better life or economic advantage. Britain is seen as a 'soft touch' for its benefit system, with inadequate laws or administrative

structures, and the effect is an uncontrolled 'flood'. The responsibility is with politicians for failing to stop it and the consequences are that great burdens are placed on British society. There are many flaws and false assumptions in such a chain of understanding. But a central part of our work and our development of new methods has been to show how such key thematic elements and the explanations which they embody can be abstracted from news texts and shown to impact upon audience understanding (Philo, 1990; Philo & Berry, 2011; Philo, Briant, & Donald, in press).

In our content analyses we break down the text to identify the major subject areas which are pursued in the news, and then examine the explanatory frameworks which underpin them. This qualitative approach involves detailed analysis of key explanatory themes in headlines and the text of news programmes and newspaper articles. We examine the preference given to some arguments in that they are highlighted by journalists or are repeatedly used or referred to across news reports. So, for example, in our work on Israel and Palestine (Philo & Berry, 2011), we found that in a content study of 89 news bulletins, there were only 17 lines of text (from transcribed bulletins) relating to the history of the conflict. When journalists used the word 'occupied', there was no explanation that the Israelis are involved in a military occupation. This led some viewers to believe that the Palestinians were the 'occupiers', since they understood the word only to mean that people were on the land. Further, while there was extensive coverage of the violence, there was very little analysis of the nature and causes. The practical effect was to remove the rationale for Palestinian action. Much of the news implicitly assumed the status quo – as if trouble and violence 'started' with the Palestinians launching an attack to which the Israelis 'responded'. This study showed the way in which the Palestinian perspectives were effectively marginalised in the debate, and the Israeli perspectives promoted.

In some studies we make a quantitative assessment of the presence of such themes across news reporting by counting the use of specific phrases and meaningful terms. On this basis we are able to give an account of the exact language used to develop specific themes and the manner in which the dominance of some was established. This is then cross-related to our audience research by a process of asking focus group members to write headlines on the subject in question. We have used this approach in a number of studies and typically participants are able to reproduce spontaneously from memory the key themes which we have established as present in media

accounts (Briant et al., 2011; Philo, 1990; Philo & Berry, 2004, 2011). In the next section, we look specifically at media content.

The media response to the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath illustrates the way in which competing ideologies battle for legitimacy. The key instigator to the crisis was that global banks had leant huge sums of money to inflated property markets, mainly in the USA but also in the UK and other parts of Europe. These loans were often given to people and institutions that would not be able to repay them. It has been argued that the pursuit of profit, and disproportionate bonuses, meant that the deals were being pushed through, and risks ignored. As Elliot and Atkinson (2008) put it:

In January (2008), panellists at the World Economic Forum in Davos were asked how the big banks of North America and Europe had failed to spot the potential losses from sub-prime lending. The one word answer from a group that included the chairman of Lloyds, London… was 'greed.' As one participant put it: 'Those running the big banks didn't have the first idea what their dealers were up to, but didn't care because the profits were so high. (p. 11)

In the UK, the Labour party would have, in the past, been the political party most likely to criticise such a development and the behaviour that caused it. For most of the twentieth century the Labour party was socially democratic and believed that free market profiteering should be curbed, that the people as a collective should own key sectors of industry and commerce and the rights of working people should be defended. However, after election defeats to the Conservatives in 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992, the Labour party rethought its brand and approach. As a result the party moved away from its traditional policies and sought to show that it was a 'safe' custodian of the de-regulated free market economy. In doing so it adopted a very supportive policy towards the financial sector (Philo, 1995). New Labour was elected to power in 1997 on the slogan 'Things can only get better', which was a reference to the perceived decline in public services and of corruption and sleaze in public life. New Labour would have a bigger safety net for the poor and spend more on health and the public sector. But nonetheless its new leader, Tony Blair, was seen as continuing Thatcher's key economic policies, including deregulation of the City of London and the banking system.

The result of these factors is that when the crash occurred, those who appeared in the mainstream media to discuss solutions tended to be those who are most supportive of – or drawn from – the system which created the problems. The British mainstream press did reflect the anger felt by its readers in response to the crash in 2008, many of whom had pensions and savings which were potentially threatened. The Daily Mail roared from its front page:

References :

[1] Cates, W. M. (1995). The technology of educational

restructuring: planning for change in teacher education.

Computers in the Schools, 11(4), 1-22.

[2] Change, J., & Moores, T., & Smith, D. K. (2005).

Prepare your mind for learning.

[3] Communications of the ACM, 48(9), 115-118.

[4] Clark, R. E. (1994). Media will never influence learning.

Educational Technology Research and Development,

42(2), 21-29