Research Article

Media, Politics and Democracy: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

This article, mostly through a theoretical background, focuses on general debates of democracy, media and politics. Giving insights regarding overall perspectives of democracy, media-democracy and politics relationship, the study tries to demonstrate the view of this interaction and how media should function in a democratic development. At the end, again to have a clearer point of view, this article tackles construction of the news stories as being matter of structuring agenda-building, public opinion and political perspectives through the news media.

Here particularly media and democracy relationship will be tried to be examined giving the importance of the media courses for democracy to function in a proper way. While examining the press and politics linkage as being the main actors to set up the daily agenda and a social consensus; the role of the media in shaping the public opinion and the ideology both through external or/and internal (institutional) motives have been tried to be discussed to better debate the media problems and examine their relationship with the politics especially in Turkey.

Keywords: Media, Democracy, Politics, Turkey, Agenda Setting.

Araştırma Makalesi

Medya, Siyaset ve Demokrasi: Eleştirel Bir Perspektif

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Öz

Bu makale, genelde teorik bağlamda olmak üzere, demokrasi, medya ve siyaset ile ilgili tartışmalara yoğunlaşmaktadır. Demokrasi, medya ve siyaset ve medyanın demokrasi ile ilişkisine dair yaklaşımlara ait genel bir değerlendirme sunduktan sonra, çalışma, bu ilişkinin genel görünümünü ve demokratik gelişimde medyanın nasıl işlemesi gerektiğini göstermeye çalışmaktadır. Makalenin sonunda, yine daha net bir bakış açısına sahip olmak için, haber hikayelerinin üretilmesi süreci; gündem oluşturma, kamuoyu yaratma ve siyasal yaklaşım inşa etme unsur olması açısından ele alınmaktadır.

Burada, özellikle medya ve demokrasi arasındaki ilişki, medya kanallarının demokrasinin daha iyi bir biçimde işlemesi için sahip oldukları öneme vurgu yapmak için irdelenmiştir. Sosyal konsensüs ve gündem oluşturmanın temel aktörleri olması açısından basın ve politika arasındaki bağ incelenirken, medyanın, kurumsal ve dış faktörlerin de etkisiyle kamuoyu ve ideoloji oluşturmadaki rolü tartışılmış, böylece Türkiye'deki medya ve demokrasi tartışmaları daha detaylı bir şekilde incelenmiş ve siyaset ile ilişkisi değerlendirilmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Medya, Demokrasi, Siyaset, Türkiye, Gündem Oluşturma.

Introduction

The relation between media, politics and democracy has been defined as a relationship based on self-interest in most sources and that they need each other for a functioning future (R., 2017; Hrebenar and Scott, 1997; Scullion et al, 2013). In very basic words, while media organisations or professionals need politics/politicians as sources for their news stories; politicians on the other part need mass communication tools to convey their messages and promises to the people and create a public acceptance especially in election times as part of their communication campaigns (Comstock and Scharrer, 2008). The mentioned relationship therefore creates a mutual process in which they benefit from each other or get in conflict sometimes. Yet it is quite difficult to estimate whether it is politics or the media to dominate the process more. Although in ethical terms, this relation is not well approached, in many countries including the democratically developed ones such as USA and UK, the media and politics relation mostly seen as dominance of politics on press freedoms and news production. Because the media organisations are under the pressure of politics and getting rid of this pressure depends many issues including legal regulations, democratic development and socio-national change, they keep supporting the political systems in creating a public consent (Scullion et al, 2013).

Particularly in underdeveloped countries, the monetary relation between the media moguls and the politics makes this addiction more complex (Romano, 2013, 161). Although the advertisement revenue is the most visible part of this relation better to go in depth whilst examining the the press, politics and democracy relation. In democratically developed countries such as Norway and Sweden the state regulations support media outlets under any circumstances. This funding gives newspapers and news courses freedom of critique and expression even though against the government or other official organisations. The reporters or editors are not afraid of losing their jobs and so the media are able to function as democratic institutions (Eide and Nikunen, 2011). The minority media organisations also are funded which allow the minority groups to be represented in the media and have their voice heard which is one of the essentials of the democracies. However, in the countries which this relation continues in an incorrect curve, the media organisation may act as big business companies and receive bids from the governmental bodies which does not allow media to criticise the official organisations and fulfil their democratic responsibility (Briggs and Burke, 2009).

In this regard media organisations and courses including the social media channels on one hand have been defined as being the tools which influence the audience and empower the mainstream ideology; on the other hand, defined as being the communication medium for the followers bridging them with the global world. Here better to remind the media's main roles: informing, entertaining and educating. In this context media outlets have the aims such as updating the audience with the recent events, conveying those messages and providing them the contents that they can spend time with (Parsemain, 2016, 152). However, this study mainly focuses on the fourth role of the media: the democratic one and so their relationship with politics. Therefore, in democratic terms the function of media can be sum up as: addressing people, informing and sometimes convincing them and providing them enough details to compare between the different political approaches which will also help them to participate politics (Wimmer et al, 2016).

Therefore, it will not be improper to indicate that mass communication in the long run have been one of the main actors of social structures and gained more power. This authority in a further process altered the social groups and the powers who became aware of the influence of media tried either to control the mass communication tools or structuring new media organisations which will work only for them and convey their messages to the society. However there remain some questions regarding the relationship between the media, politics and society: What should be the first aim of the media? How and where they should limit their relations with the politics and politicians? Should they be open to the interventions of political, economic or military powers? What are the limits of freedom of expression and criticism for the media organisations if there is any and who should decide these limits and why?

While trying to answer these questions, this article firstly giving insights about the democracy debates, will be examining the relation of media with the politics and how they influence each other which will in the next step impact the social structure. Both media and politics are claimed to be serving the people and they both appealed to have no alternative. With no doubt they might be in conflict while fulfilling their roles. Therefore, these both institutions should systematically be analysed to be able to learn their relations and interaction within the society and how and where they influence each other in the way towards democracy being the most applied government system so far.

Media and Democracy: A Compulsory Togetherness?

The relationship of democracy with the media here will be tackled as a way to ease operating properly since media outlets serve democracy through transforming the socio-political and economical clashes into opinion diversity and allow the public to follow governmental/political updates (Bourrie, 2012, 261). However, looking at the Turkish case this study will also try to answer if this relation is essential between media and democracy and that can the media organisations sometimes be a threat for the democracy as seen in the Turkish context especially during the military coup times in 1960, 1971, 1980, 1998 (Arikan, 2011, 33) and in 2016 coup attempt (Gecer, 2017, 44).

To understand the relation between media and democracy it is necessary to refer to political communication strategies through which the politicians tell and convince people about their political aims (Rawnsley and Gong, 2012). Democracy in this regard is a competition arena. The politicians who demand running the country, need to publicise their plans and make people familiar with them. The media at this level become a way of accessing people (Windsch, 2008, 87). However, for the media to undertake this responsibility in an unbiased way, press freedoms must be provided. The media, known as the 'fourth estate' in democracies, will help democracy to function with its all institutions if they can undertake their responsibilities in a free manner. These freedoms are not only related to the governmental, political or or other external elements but also are about the internal media subjects such as ownership and editorial independency (Kalyango and Eckler, 2010).

The type of freedom for media to contribute democracy, according to Peterson and his collaborators, is 'positive freedom', which involves defending the media against exterior intervention and supporting them with the tools they need to undertake their responsibilities (Peterson et al, 1963). However, for media organisations not to face

strict legal pressures, they should have a certain level of self-censorship mechanisms. On the other hand, media professionals through internal education should learn how to get rid of political or economic pressures not to tend a biased story telling (Karklins et al, 2011). Nevertheless, the commercial interests of the media open them to manipulation by political and economic actors, especially in Turkey, where media owners receive business form the state bodies. For that reason, the relation between media and business organisations got very much complicated; the coverings done by such commercial-centred interests have made media organisations market their audiences to the trade groups in order to receive ads (Kellner, 2009, 96). This has caused financial elites to become influential in the decision-making processes and manipulating the news producers (Chomsky and Herman, 1995). When such commercial influence on the media increases, distortion in the flow of information to the public occurs, media keep away from questioning the taboos and thus the necessary participation for democracy gets weakened (Keane, 1991, 89).

In a democracy, media supposed to observe events in the society as a third party and enables the flow of information for the people to help them to express themselves and contribute to construction of the public opinion in a liberal manner (Stromback and Kaid, 2008; Buckley, 200, 181). Thus, they enlarge the boundaries of political debate and force politics to consider public opinion and hence prevent politics being the only decision maker (Nawawy and Powers, 2010). Here the main point is the mediating of the media but not creating a partisan tendency among political groups and different ideologies (Curran et al, 2010). In this regard media generate forums through which the daily issues could be discussed and undertake an informal control on behalf of people pushing the governments or the politicians to consider public opinion as the media organisations do not only shape the individual approaches but also are affecting the creation of public opinion in the process of socialisation (Elkon, 2007, 22). At this level diversity of the media gains importance to have an unbiased update. In liberal democracy, everyone has the right to establish communication organizations. However, as this requires economic power in practical terms, this means that economical elites are dominating the world of thought. Furthermore, having a multitude of media channels in a country does not necessarily mean media diversity or freedoms and does not guarantee democratic contribution on their own (Raycheva, 2009, 83).

Here it will be a single sided examination if only to talk about pressures that media face while discussing the media and democracy relation. As it has been the case in In Turkey, excluding the last coup attempt in 2016, especially during the military coup times, the owners of the media organisations have been economically powerful enough to affect the political agenda and even force changes of the cabinet and government (Erdin, 2010, 189). The Berlusconi case in Italy is the one of the most obvious examples of this political power and media ownership. In 1994, former Italian PM Berlusconi used his media organisations as a course of propaganda and ignored the positioning of the media on the free market idea (Reljic, 2006, 77).

The responsibilities of the media a democratic political system can be summarised in four basic points: (1) Media systems must carry the necessary information to help citizens understand the public or political concepts enabling them to make independent choices. (2) Media while conveying the actual and recent news to the people must aim to create points of view, which consider both collective

and individual approaches. (3) At the same time, the media must provide pluralism in ideas, comments and debates and must help this plurality to be considered in the communication world. (4) The media must function at the right time and must produce content to encourage diversity in cultural expressions (Curran and Seaton, 2009).

Democratisation of a country also depends on democratisation of its communication systems and organisations by establishing union rights for the workers. Then media ethics should be considered as part of individual ethics and thus the manipulation or misdirection by the media professionals could be prevented (Himelboim and Limor, 2008). Legal regulations should also prevent the misuse of media companies by their owners who threaten politics. However, establishing such regulations should not unfairly target companies with smaller capital/income owning media organisations as this would harm plurality and communications freedoms (TESEV, 2013, 4). Additionally, in order to construct responsible media, local media originations should be empowered through fair encouragement (Meryl, 2007, 162). Public advertisements by the state organs should also be delivered under control of an independent committee and this board should be able to inspect the circulations and ratings to avoid injustice. Thus, the local media organisations will be free of political pressures to keep their operations alive (Balcytiene, 2012, 63).

Press and Politics: Two Actors in Setting the Agenda

Discussing the agenda-setting issues aims to explain the relation between the media, public and political agenda and looks at how these institutions influence each other (Rogers and Dearing, 2012). Media become at the centre of daily politics and have an active role because of their ability to determine the daily agend a and to decide what and how 'newsworthy' features should be conveyed to the audiences. This means that the press, like politicians, may also have a political role affecting the political process and setting the circle of political arguments. The media's role in determining which issues to be covered can also negatively/positively affect the political or public agenda (Denhart et al, 2013).

In this regard, after looking at media and democracy relation and examining the roles of media under diverse political approaches, this part will look at the relationship between the press and politics. Because the media-politics relationship usually emerges as the result of political pressures on the media organisations, media theories (e.g. authoritative, totalitarian, democratic participant) and communication theories (e.g. agenda setting, manufacturing consent, framing) seems to suggest that politics is what dominant in setting agenda. However, it is not always the case since the relationship of the media with the democracy actually is based on media's so called responsible attitude to influence politics (Hare and Weinstein, 2009). Nevertheless, this relationship between media and politics mostly emerges at election times since the press produce the politics-focused news stories as part of the election process. Furthermore, as election times are politically indeterminate "studies on media dependency suggest that uncertainty in the political environment generates heightened anxiety among citizens. Therefore, citizens are more likely to turn to mass media as a source of information and in doing so are more easily influenced by the mass media" (Stockman and Gallagher, 2011, 450). Moving from this point, the agenda- setting studies try to answer the following questions: Which themes are the focus points of the political or press

agenda? Which subjects are discussed in these two organisations in parallel with each other (Oegema et al, 2008)?

As a further explanation, agenda-setting theory refers to the ability of the media to determine the issues to be discussed in the political/public agenda and people's knowledge, which has been structured by the media courses and includes media, public, policy and corporate agenda studies (Miles, 2012, 42). This theory is regarded as the relation curve between the media, politics and public agenda and indicates that these agendas are influencing each other (Steinberg, 2007, 262). Therefore, the 'agenda-setting model' focuses on the realities about the events and questions how they are covered in the media and how mass communication creates the opinions about the socio-political issues in the individual's mind (Baran and Davis, 2010). Regarding the capability of the press on setting the agenda, Cohen's statement is frequently attributed, and it has become the basis of this discussion (Cohen, 1963, 13):

> The press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about. The world looks different to different people depending not only on their personal interests but also on the map that is drawn for them by the writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read.

Cohen does not find that the press is successful in telling people what to think. However, based on the statements that McCombs and others make and looking at what is being talked about on the social daily agenda it is possible to say that the press do tell us what to think and debate (McCombs and Bell, 2008). The media at this level influence the daily subjects and their frameworks and the news stories covered by the media impact the public mind (Estrada and McCombs, 1997).

Because the agenda-setting theory mostly regards the press-politics relationship, it is necessary to address *media agenda* and *political agenda* separately. The media agenda is described as the list of the events and the news seen in the press in a period of time. Studies about the agenda-setting skills of the media explain that the media in a country covering certain subjects make them important in the public and political spheres. While the press set the daily agenda, the organisation of the media groups, the process of news production and the relationship between the events and mass communication influence this setting process (Farnsworth and Lichter, 2008). However, Shoemaker and Reese tackle several other hypotheses that influence and shape the media content, which ultimately will be transmitted to the public. They present five internal and external levels that affect the creation of the media content and news production (Shoemaker and Reese, 2013):

1. Individual level: Media professionals' demographic features, sexual orientations, educational, ethnic and cultural backgrounds, beliefs and attitudes.
2. Organisational structure: The relationship of the press with power and politics, media outlet's commercial income and economic features and media policies surrounding this organisation.
3. Media routines: News production procedures and processes, news values and aims.
4. Outside influences: Relations with other media organisations, closeness of the news producers with the news sources, the effects of the pressure and lobby

groups while doing the news stories, the relation between public relations and news production and media and governmental dealings.

5. Ideology of the press: This is the most referred to factor affecting media content and so the agenda. Shoemaker and Reese also state that ideology is above all other factors in structuring media content and that ideology works for the benefit of the governmental powers.

Of course, the factors, which influence media content, are not limited to those above. For instance, Fortunato says that the actual daily events do influence the media content and so their agenda setting (Fortunato, 2008, 34). On the other hand, the media agenda is influenced by other mass communication courses although this effect is mostly seen as the result of the dominance of the 'big' media organisations. For instance, when BBC covers a news story about a subject other press organisation are influenced by such coverage and they cover it the next day (McCombs, 2004, 87).

As for the latter one, it is possible to explain political agenda as being: the problems occurring in daily life needing urgent answers, the social expectations from the politics, demand of the media to follow and sometimes to control the politicians, political aims to solve social problems and other factors impacting politics. The main points of the political agenda are people's beliefs and the politicians' strategies to influence them. The studies on the political agenda have looked for which factors influence political agenda. However due to its complex structure and relations, analysing political agenda has difficulties. Because there are many issues to be discussed at the political agenda, not all of them can find place (Kaid, 2004, 267). Therefore, it is sometimes difficult to answer why some easier problems gain more importance than more urgent ones. This complexity is also valid for the above-mentioned agenda-setting theory and media agenda. Therefore, the agenda-setting studies looked for the reasons of positioning these problems (Walgrave and Aelst, 2006; Walgrave and Aelst, 2011). However, there are some special characteristics for an event or information to achieve primary importance on the political agenda which also could be mentioned for the complete agenda-setting theory. The crisis and its symptoms, the status of the source of the communications, political dealings, the recentness of an event, and emergence of unexpected news events (Kraus, 2000, 267) can be counted among these. Cook and his friends also mention the benefits of the interest groups, scientific data, usage of mass communication and the events that deeply affect society such as economic recession (Cook et al, 1983).

Of course, one of the prominent effects on the political agenda is the impact of the media as there is a strong relationship between these two institutions such as economic relations emerges from media ownership issues, PR efforts to direct the media and mutual pressures between the news source and the news producer. In this regard, media coverage of a subject so often may influence the political agenda and force politicians to talk and focus on it (Smith, 2010, 15). Politicians consider the media agenda while determining their next-day programme as this will also be related to their communication with their voters. Politicians being aware of possible misrepresentations may wish to structure good relations with media professionals and outlets. On the other hand, the public agenda also affects the political agenda, as public opinion is very influential in determining politicians' activities (Geer, 2004, 27). Here, it is necessary to note that when the public cannot create pressure on the political agenda on their own and need the intervention of

organisations such as NGOs and media courses, which have the ability to reach politics (Steady, 2006, 33).

Furthermore, because the media outlets influence each other, the political agenda that has been created by the other political groups may affect the political agenda of another party. If the government party is skilful enough to create an agenda, that will be followed by the opposition (Grynaviski, 2010, 210). For instance, the main opposition party in Turkey, Republican People's Party (CHP) has often been criticised for not being able to create its own agenda but always following the government's daily discussions. No doubt this is also related to the ability of the opposition party as it may also push the governing parties to follow their agenda just as some NGOs or pressure groups do (Ewoh, 2004, 233). Accordingly, powerful leaders particularly in economically developed countries can determine the political agenda because they can influence the media and other political parties to also talk about issues as seen in the Turkish context in the personality of the Turkish PM or in a global context in the personalities of the American President or the Russian PM (Soha and Peake, 2011).

The criteria of the subjects based on the political agenda or on the press agenda, are different. To understand which subjects and why, how long etc. remain on the media and political agenda in a country further analysis should be undertaken. However, it is possible to say that according to the timing features the topics remaining on the press and political agendas are changeable in connection with the surrounding events and perceptions. At the time of major events such as economic crisis, elections and political turmoil the press agenda is very much determined by the political agenda. In addition, major-influence developments can cause the media and political agenda to resemble each other (McCombe et al, 1991). The press agenda is very much related to the sociology of the news and newsworthy features as for instance any breaking news or dramatic developments such as ethnic/religious or cultural political decisions, wars and earthquakes might change the press agenda. For wars and other conflicts to be put forward on the media agenda, it is again possible to relate this to newsworthy issues, as 'bad news is good news'. However, for an issue to be on both the press and political agendas ideologies and individual or institutional interests are also important (Barnett and Reynolds, 2009). Looking at the Turkish context for example, if a newspaper has a nationalist view it may see any news stories regarding minority rights as a 'national security' problem and may focus on these kinds of news as 'terrorism' issue. Alternatively, if there is any discussion about the media owner, his media organisation might have this discussion as its focal point to defend the owner.

Conclusion

Being courses for exchanging information and creating public opinion, media organisations have been at the centre of different power clashes. Although the desire towards (mis)using the media outlets mostly goes with these kind of negative connotations, their role in democratic, cultural and social improvement should also need to be analysed to increase their influence in a decent social construction. On the other hand, the ideal performance of journalism is said to be one of the main keystones of a good socio-political structure for its capability to observe the authorities on behalf of the people, to represent each social group in the community and to voice minority right when they at stake despite its affinity to the majority in democratic terms. Nonetheless increasing media technologies,

news professionalism, citizen journalism and social media shares have not yet lowered the existence of authoritative regimes and/or totalitarian governments. The newer media technologies emerge the more different ways of censorship or surveillance seem to occur. Those oppressor governments benefitting from the most recent technologies find methods such as perception management, public opinion polls, and hiring social media accounts to influence the public opinion and manufacture consent.

Democracy, within the context of politics and media relationship and especially media courses being the medium between the politics and the people, favours plurality and freedoms over governance of minority and suppression. Therefore, democracy requires the atmosphere in which governmental organisations and authorities can be controlled and criticised; different voices and ideologies can be visible with no restriction. The objective of the press/media in democratic societies is to inform the society especially regarding the issues which are in benefit of the people, to create a public opinion and to enlighten them towards a better governance. However rather than attributing all these responsibility to the media organisations, the need for a democratic culture in which all ideologies tolerate each other should also be noted.

The new media technologies and increasing usage of social media courses forced the relation between the governments and the people to move in new phase, to be more open and to gain new directions. In this regard, as mentioned in the literature review the representative or parliamentary democracy seems to have difficulties in answering social demands where people through these new media tools such as smart phones, blogs, forums, e-mails and other internet platforms can question the authorities and demand instant responses. Furthermore, these kinds of concerns regarding the parliamentary democracy caused democracy as a system to be questioned and criticised. Therefore, media organisations both in traditional and new forms, can build a new platform for democracies to overcome these negative criticisms and generate a *deliberative* ambiance where more voices can be heard, and more problems can be solved through wider debates and consensus.

On the other hand, these debates point the imperative relation between media, politics and democracy. The relation is always alive in different forms and the role of media outlets in democracy depends on the feature of the political power where if totalitarian it becomes a voce for propaganda and if liberal or democratic of functions as controlling the governments and highlighting social demand. Here it is necessary to note that the existence of diverse media groups does not necessarily mean to have a free atmosphere as there are countries where the monopoly is ongoing despite of the presence of number of different media outlets. In this case the powers are keeping media organisations under pressure do not allow them to represent oppositional approaches. This intervention also is named as media imperialism where politics sees media as to be the courses for propaganda and for creating an oppressive culture. At the end of the day, this complexity takes us to media literacy education through which the audience will be learning how to handle the media content and access the correct news among the manipulated and/or falsified ones. The media follower through media literacy education will be able to distinguish between the false and true and will be able to look at the news production process through a wider perspective where the intricate politics and media relation is more visible.

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