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The interrelatedness of politics and democracy's 4th power

The importance of a free press to a democratic government

Introduction

Media's great influence on culture and vice versa is undoubted. But how does this relate to politics? Do politics have an impact on media, or the other way around, do media influence politics?

Hungary is in the phase of adopting a new media law that has triggered a controversial debate both nationally and internationally. In this paper the author will demonstrate that not only does politics have effects on media but also media on politics. This indicative study will outline the importance of a free press for the proper functioning of a democratic government, and how a country's internal issues can be influenced due to national and international media pressure. The research is demonstrated on the case of Hungary's current media law debate via analysis of different media texts.

The most important research questions include several aspects. How does the national and international press react to Hungary's media law? How was the media law presented by Hungarian and international politicians? What were the responses of Hungarian politicians to media pressure? What is the outcome of the current media law topic? With the help of specific media texts the author will provide analysis of these issues.

Background

In June 2010 the Hungarian government introduced a bill to the parliament to modify existing media laws and regulations (Cser-Palkovics). The law has several features that are unconstitutional and restrict the practice of free speech and free press. The most important issue is the creation of an institution of government appointees that would centrally manage national media (“Megszavazták”). This, of course, would restrict media’s real independent features.

The announcement of the planned regulation drew international attention to Hungary immediately, especially since the country is the president of the European Parliament for the first half of 2011. Articles, videos, other broadcasts have appeared about the topic all around Europe and even by international organizations. European politicians also demonstrated their fears about the new law and the suitability of Hungary as the EU president and the credibility of the EU as a whole. Due to the international pressure, Hungarian politicians have relented that the law could be changed if needed (“Hungary media law”). This obviously demonstrates the power of press, especially that of media texts in the international press and the pressure of international politics about Hungary’s internal affair. But can the media’s pressure lead to real change? This will be seen if the law is really modified.

Media text analysis

Media’s great influence on culture and vice versa is undoubted. But how does this relate to politics? Do politics have an impact on media, or the other way around, do media influence politics? In the first part of the analysis, taking an example of political advertising and using Silverblatt’s “keys to media literacy” (Silverblatt) the author will demonstrate how media affects politics and how politics affect media in the world, focusing here on Hungary.

With the development of technology, international media is able to reflect more on countries’ internal affairs and thus to influence their politics and culture. This can be observed in the case of Hungary and Europe. The current political situation in Hungary has led European

media to deal with the country's internal affairs on an international scale. Can this change the initial intents of Hungarian politicians? Results so far indicate that this is a possible outcome. The paper will demonstrate how the internal affairs of one country can reach such high magnitudes due to media interference that it stimulates debate from international organizations and how international media texts can influence a country's internal affairs to derail it from its original track.

The political advertisement chosen for the detailed analysis is entitled "Green MEPs protest Hungary's Media Law" (Greensefa). It is a political advertisement that deals with the new media law that could be adopted in Hungary in the next few months. The short video is harshly criticizing this new media law.

Using Silverblatt's first key, process, the video can be examined in several ways (17-63). In this case, the analysis of the media communicator is crucial. The media communicator is a political party: The Greens – European Free Alliance in the European Parliament. As the website of The Greens describes, they are a parliamentary group made up mostly of Greens, "representatives of stateless nations and disadvantaged minorities" (The Greens). They aim at promoting "fundamental human rights and environmental justice" and "cultural and democratic rights" (The Greens). Thus, the freedom of the press as a regulatory body of government occupies an important position in their politics.

The most important manifest function of this video is to demonstrate the actions taken by the Hungarian government. The Greens want to draw attention to the unconstitutional attributes of the law to be passed. With raising awareness of the issue, they are also trying to persuade decision makers in Hungary to take steps in order to modify the content of the regulation. There is also a hidden, latent message in the advertisement: the pursuit of votes of those who feel the issue as their own.

The audience in this case goes beyond the borders of the country. Not because of the topic itself but because of the fact that it was aired on the Internet, on the Green party's own Youtube channel. The target group can be identified as the Green party followers although it is not solely geared towards that domain since this channel can be browsed by a huge audience. There is one obvious characteristic: they are interested in politics. The Greens do not utilize narrowcasting in this case but they aim at broadcasting, thus reaching to the biggest possible audience, but most importantly to citizens of the European Union.

Silverblatt's second key is context (65-132). In the case of this video, this is the most important feature of the analysis. The historical context for the ad is the current political situation in Hungary and the European Union detailed in previous paragraphs: the debate about the media law that has been going on for months.

This video presents a clear image of Hungary's current political and cultural status. The country had a change in the government in 2010 due to parliamentary elections. Since then, the new government has tried to pass several laws that appear to be unconstitutional in order to change the bad financial situation due to the financial crisis. Tension in Hungary can be observed in all aspects of politics. The current topic of the media law only aggravates the situation and led to the involvement of not only the national, but also the international media.

This context and the video itself demonstrate the attempts of Hungarian government politicians to regulate and own basically all forms of media in the country. If the ownership cannot be realized they would still be able to reach a common regulatory framework that would disable any media from pursuing real freedom of speech. Politicians basically aim at the centralization of power in terms of the media, in order to maintain the status quo and their power. Public service responsibilities and functions of the media are completely being ignored.

The constitution of the Republic of Hungary supports free speech (1949. évi XX. törvény). In addition, the new law itself preaches about free speech, but in reality the government body that they plan to establish is completely contradictory. The national Hungarian Television is already owned totally by the government but presented as “transmitting values” – slogan of the company. And even though it is government owned, it is, shocking or not, still the most valuable television on the Hungarian market. Still, the regulation of the media by government bodies is not a sustainable solution in a real democracy.

Silverblatt’s third key to media literacy deals with the framework of the media text (133-162). Several functions can be observed in this case. The title obviously presents the story, although if someone is not familiar with the topic this will not give them enough information. By starting the movie, the citations from European media demonstrate the issue more, but the final clarification only comes at the end of the short video, when Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Co-President of The Greens, addresses Mr. Viktor Orbán, Prime Minister of Hungary.

There is no fictional story presented by this media text. It does not have a usual structure but it still has an introduction demonstrating the different articles in international media and introducing the Hungarian Prime Minister, Mr. Viktor Orbán. The conflict is obvious: the tension between those supporting and those objecting to Hungary’s new media law. However, a traditional plot does not exist in this political advertisement. The video only shows images of the politicians and the news appearing in media all around the world.

The conclusions demonstrate the opposition by most of the politicians in the European Union about the new media law to be accepted in Hungary. This is the last piece that “the audience is exposed to”, thus this strongly influences how audience responds to the media presentation (Silverblatt 154). This is the strongest and most effective part of this specific media text.

Silverblatt also deals with the production elements in order to give a complete analysis of a media text (163-202). The edited sequence is a good choice in this media text. It does not say the whole story at the beginning but the audience only receives the complete flow of information at the end. The viewers are gradually exposed to the final message: the political actions of the government are not satisfactory.

The news extracts in the beginning of the video are edited in a way like they are written by a typewriter, thus demonstrating the feature of the topic itself. The pictures utilized in the whole media text are also displayed as if they have just been shot by a camera – this is applied for the same reasons. Even the sound of the camera is further supporting this effect. The slow images about the politicians also deepen the message.

The “commentary” images by the directors are black and white and the real images of the politicians and the parliament are in color. This choice supports the argument of the video and helps the audience differentiate between the latent and manifest messages, thus the facts and opinions. The “commentary” images include the camera zooming on people’s mouths covered with tape. This represents the characteristics of the media law, that it prevents free press. The camera is zoomed in first and then enlarges the image for a bigger scale.

The choice of music and other sound effects also clearly demonstrate the tone and message of the media text and support its arguments.

Other international media texts have also investigated the same topic. A South Park episode entitled Blackout for Hungary is aired on the website of Youtube. In the short episode one character of the series is trying to download something from the website of The Pirate Bay but faces a black banner protesting against the new media law (Mmadave91). The Pirate Bay is an existing torrent website that took part in the protest against the media law initiated by the site blackout4hungary.net (Mutton). This initiative was then followed by several other sites all over

the world, just as it happened with the South Park episode. The original title of the show was The China Problem and it was aired as the 8th episode in season 12. As a result it can be assumed that the critical short episode is only the work of an individual. However, it still received 10,995 views by users and the Youtube statistics about the video have only been growing. The same campaign was even followed on Facebook. Blackout for Hungary created a Facebook page and a Facebook event for the initiative (Blackout for Hungary, Facebook page and Facebook event).

The Internet was flooded by other similar protests and initiatives. The European Federation of Journalists and its affiliate, the Hungarian Association of Journalists has drafted a protest petition that was signed by many other groups. The petition was even supported by a European-wide campaign against the media law that was launched in January (“Journalists Question Hungary’s Leadership”). The petition, among other ideas, demanded the constitutional review of the new act and the involvement of media workers in its modification (“Petition against Hungarian Media Law”).

Other printed and online journals and magazines were also questioning Hungary’s new media law. As a previously mentioned BBC article suggested in December, politicians are willing to modify the law due to the international media pressure (“Hungary media law”).

The Economist published an article in January that appeared both in the printed and the online edition. In this article the authors are not only opposing the legal attributes of the media law but also combining several other topics of Hungarian legislation and the questioning of the successful EU presidency (“Hungary's other deficit”). This demonstrated how the single topic can lead to an overall dissatisfaction even on unrelated issues due to the international pressure of media.

The BBC’s other article was published in January. The news piece goes into details about how the possible media law overshadows the whole EU presidency of Hungary (Marcus). This

article was presented when talks were already going on in the country in order to provide a modified law that could be acceptable for the international participants of the debate.

The Wall Street Journal article that appeared in late February was published after the drafting of the new version of the law. The article takes a critical point of view even about the changes stating that these are still not enough for the functioning of a democratic government and free press (Feher).

Reactions to media pressure

Due to international pressure the government has started the modification of the law. This obviously demonstrates the power of press. The government has started defining more precisely all the core aspects of the law, as an example among others the definition of “causing offense”. However, ambiguous parts still remain, like how media can infringe on public morality or offend human dignity. These ambiguous topics will be interpreted by the Media Council, whose members are appointed by the governing party. Thus, the political autonomy of the Media Council is still questionable. In addition, the protection for anonymous sources is also restricted. The debate however is still active, a great majority of European politicians and the international media still demand further modification of the laws.

Conclusions

It is true that media and government influence each other. The current events in Hungary led international media to deal with these topics. On the other hand, the news appearing in different sources is pushing the government to take action that is more acceptable. Daniel Cohn-Bendit, Co-President of The Greens, notes at the end of the Greens’ video: information must interfere with politics, this is the aim of the media, and this is what boosts the real mechanism of democracy (Greensefa).

As the analysis demonstrates, politics obviously have important effects on media. It is media's task to inform the public about political events and regulations, thus it is a common topic of media texts. But do media have a great impact on politics? As this paper proves, the influence exists. It can be seen that the international pressure has already turned Hungarian politicians towards a consensus about modifying the bill of Hungarian media. But how great can this impact be? This can only be measured in a few months, if the given law is really modified or even better, not passed by government.

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