

Understanding Media-Politics-Economy-Society Interrelationship in India: Relevance of Habermas and Chomsky*

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Abstract: The salient focus of this paper is to locate the relevance of Jürgen Habermas and Noam Chomsky within the context of media-politics-economy interface in India. This paper argues that Indian media is in close relationship with the politics and the economy of the country, especially after the new economic policies were adopted by the then government in 1990 that opened the Indian market for foreign investments. This paved the way from publicly owned media to privatized media in India. The shift in the structure of media as an institution brought with it concomitant changes in terms of ownership, editorial policies and dissemination of news by media houses. The paper aims at decoding and explaining this shift and the emerging relationship between media, politics and economy in India adjacent to it by taking recourse to Habermas' concept of Public Sphere and Chomsky's understanding of Propaganda Model.

Before delving into the theoretical structure of the paper, it is important to have a brief understanding of the present structure of media as a social institution in India. During 1990s there was a massive boom in the economic sector and media was a part of it. Following the policy of liberalization, foreign investments were allowed in the field of media, and this led to a media explosion in the country. Indian media became globalized and liberalized. India adopted the New Economic Policy in 1991.² This opened the floodgate for private investors to start business, and media was a significant part of this. The period also witnessed a boom in the field of electronic media as private news channels, both English and vernacular, started to emerge. Similarly, foreign news channels like CNN, DW, or BBC, which were previously barred, started

*This paper is part of the doctoral thesis titled 'Role of Media in Electoral Politics in India: A Study of General Elections 2014'. The study included identification of mediated buzzwords disseminated by six prominent newspapers in India namely The Times of India, The Telegraph, The Hindu, Dainik Jagran, Hindustan Dainik and Ananda Bazar Patrika and analyzing the impact of these buzzwords on the electorate cutting across different social locations. The ultimate of the study was to estimate media's relation with politics and economy, given that majority of the media houses are privately owned today, for understanding the role of media in influencing electoral politics in India through mediated buzzwords. The salient buzzwords emerging at the end of study include NaMo, Gujarat Model of Development, Hindutva, Minority, Corruption, Lokpal and Chai pe Charcha. The study concluded that these were the buzzwords that were disseminated the most by the newspapers and also they were recognized by the electorate as influencing their political opinion formation. The concepts of public sphere by Habermas and propaganda model by Herman and Chomsky constitute the theoretical foundation of the study where the researcher aims at their relevance in Indian context.

entering the country. During the post-liberalization period, certain visible changes started surfacing in the Indian media, including a gradual devaluation of the status of newspaper editors. In other words, media in India entered the realm of privatization in the 1990s which has brought about gradual and crucial shifts in the structure of media houses, editorial policies which are now conditioned by ownership of media and the manner in which it disseminates news to the electorate.

Within this larger context, key factors involved in the study include media, politics, economy and society. Politics is represented by the state, society is primarily represented by the electorate and economy largely refers to the ownership issues of media houses. For exploring media-politics-economy-society relationships, this paper takes recourse to the concepts of public sphere and propaganda model espoused by Jürgen Habermas and Noam Chomsky, respectively.

The paper adopts a society centric approach that views media as a social institution and aims at analyzing its various features and effects in its relations with other social institutions, namely, politics, governance, and the people. In this light, the paper posits that media's role vis-a-vis politics (state) and the electorate/voter (society) is significant in the extent to which it influences and impacts the latter. It is the voters who decide upon their voting decision based on what the newspapers publish and the news channels broadcast on politics. Media's role is integrally related to its accountability to the voters and accumulation and dissemination of facts in terms of political news. Media's political campaigns' latent functions are not necessarily intended by the parties, but can result as a by-product of their campaign activities within the electorate (Schmitt-Beck, 2009). Intensification of political communication before an election induces interests among the voters to engage in politics and cast their votes. Also, better political information and awareness means more involvement in the voting system and clearer political identification with candidates on the part of the voters. Therefore, media is the crucial facilitator for political opinion formation of the electorate, especially before an election.

Society Centric Approach

Theories on media are characterized by various perspectives, among which the distinction between the liberals and the conservatives is the most pronounced (McQuail, 2010). Liberal theories largely account for the leftist theories on media that are critical of the way global conglomerates and state corporations co-opt media for their vested interests. As for the conservatives, they claim that the "liberal bias" (McQuail, 2010) in news damage media's traditional values. In other words, leftist theories on media are interested in preservation of media's independence at the face of state and private ownership, while the conservatives negate such possibilities.

McQuail (2010) differentiated between media centric and society centric approach and materialist and culturalist approach. As the name suggests, media centric approach focuses on the activity of media within its own sphere and also entails autonomy to media. It considers mass media to be the primary agent of social change paved by technological development. On the other hand, society centric approach sees media as a part of a larger social structure which is directly influenced by political and economic forces. In this light, media theories generating from society centric approach are larger social theories (Golding and Murdock, 1978).

This paper takes into account theories that fall largely within the purview of society centric approach and entail social culturalist and social materialist perspectives. Both Habermas and Chomsky, along with Herman, envisage, critically analyze, and contextualize media within a

tripartite inter-relational framework including state (politics) and electorate (society). Thus, within this framework laid down by McQuail (2010), this paper will review the already existing literature on media embodied in the theories of Habermas and Chomsky (and Herman). While Habermas is a leftist thinker hailing from the Frankfurt School, Chomsky (and Herman) are not conservatives; all of them are critical in their theoretical approaches and view media in its relation with politics and society. Their analyses of media are conditioned by the political structure and the ways of reception of media dissemination by the society. In this light, they both uphold society centric approaches while theorizing on media.

Media-Politics-Economy-Society Dynamics: Relevance of Habermas and Chomsky

Precondition for the existence of public sphere as espoused by Habermas³ is independence and full access of the public to information, whereas Chomsky begins his theory by claiming that in actual situation in a democracy, public is barred from managing their affairs and information is highly controlled. Also, Chomsky considers the relation between media and economic elite from the beginning of the propaganda model, on the other hand, Habermas acknowledges media-economy merger only as part of the crisis in a democracy. However, for both Habermas and Chomsky, mechanism of political opinion formation is similar insofar as both contextualize media's role as communicator between information induced by the state and the public as receiving the news content. While information is travelling from the state to the public through media, for Habermas it takes the shape of polled opinion which translates eventually into public opinion, and for Chomsky it becomes propaganda. This difference is mainly due to the fact that Habermas considers media and public to be independent while Chomsky does not. This is also reflected in the fact that Chomsky contextualizes his theory of propaganda model in free market economy, while Habermas espouses that participation in public sphere is economically conditioned in terms of access to resources, social status, and cultural background.

However, both Habermas and Chomsky (and Herman) deal with media, politics and society, while exploring the role of media in the larger societal context. Both are interested in how media is informed by the other two actors while it also influences them. However, there are few distinct points of differentiation between their perspectives on media's role in society. Firstly, Habermas does not directly consider the economic issues of ownership and control of media. However, for Chomsky and Herman, political and economic conditions are the two most integral elements that influence media's functioning in a society. While Habermas identifies state or politics as crucial in constituting the public sphere, he does not include the economic factor as directly as Chomsky. In the study in context, relationship between media, politics, and economy is crucial. To begin with, majority of the newspapers in India today are privately owned. Therefore, they thrive in free market economy in tune with the model espoused by Chomsky. Next, privatization of media implies presence of big corporates owning the media houses. Many of them also have political ambitions. As a result, a certain interaction between the economic, political, and media elites emerge in the Indian media market. As opined by Chomsky, such interrelationships have potential for editorial compromise of news dissemination.

Secondly, and most importantly, Habermas allows agency to media and the public while he considers the state to be independent. This is further pronounced in the way he differentiates between published opinion and polled opinion. Published opinion, as he suggests, generates from state machineries like parliaments and bureaucracy. On the other hand, polled opinion generates

from the convergence between information disseminated by the media and received and processed by the public. Published and polled opinion together come to constitute public sphere. In this light, Habermas considers the state to be an independent factor, while media and public (society) interact to construct a part of the public sphere. In this regard, this study draws heavily from Habermas. Media in India is independent. As a matter of fact, it is termed as the fourth pillar of democracy. Traditionally, newspapers in India have always played an adversarial role in evaluating the state machinery, e.g., during Emergency (1975-77) when press was gagged, many newspapers continued writing and some would come up with blank pages, but printing the newspapers nevertheless. Also, being the biggest democracy in the world, a massive amount of political agency lies in the hand of the public who cast their vote on the basis of dissemination of news in newspapers and news channels. In this light, this paper, like Habermas also states, begins with the assumption that both media and the public are independent.

However, it progresses and the findings unfold, Chomsky gathers relevance. Chomsky's propaganda model suggests a direct relationship between state and politics, economy, and media. As a matter of fact, the propaganda model suggests that society is only a receiver of information strictly conditioned by politics and economy often working as a diffused entity. In other words, not only does politics and economy condition media's dissemination of information, they often pair up with each other for doing so. In this light, the propaganda model denies any agency to the public or society, unlike Habermas. In India, within the context of privatized media and political ambition of the media owners, such trends have been visible and noted in the paper. In this light, media sometimes become a part of the overall politico-economic power play, especially before an election. It has been observed that certain newspapers would popularize certain buzzwords, especially those with strong political connotations to the exclusion of certain others. Consequently, following Chomsky, this paper also finds that economy and politics at some level enjoy more agency than public and the media.

Next, in addition to five filters mentioned in Chomsky's propaganda model, this paper introduces a sixth filter within the Indian context, namely, anti-Islam. Specifically within the context of the present BJP-led government at the centre, anti-Islamic sentiment of the people in general and media in particular is on the rise in India. In this light, the study identifies it as the sixth filter relevant in the Indian context. The sixth filter has been identified while categorising the mediated buzzwords popularized by the newspapers in context that exhibit strong anti-Islamic sentiments. This has been discussed further in the concluding section.

Further, one of the criticisms that Chomsky and Herman met with has been that they do not recognize the independence and professionalism of the journalists. Within the Indian context, it is primarily the media houses for which the journalists work that insist more upon professionalism than the individual journalists themselves. Since the journalists are bound by the editorial policies of the media houses, the threshold of their independence and professionalism are also conditioned and often curtailed.

Next, participation of the public in the decision-making process of the state that is epitomized in electoral politics is the defining premise within which both the two theories under review are situated. In similar lines, the paper also depends heavily on the participation of the public. Although it might sound contradictory that this research on one hand gives prerogative to public participation, and on other hand recognizes the lack of agency enjoyed by the public, it can be claimed that within the structural factors that Chomsky ascertains, this paper holds that the electorate in India enjoys participation in electoral processes before an election. To prove this

point, it draws directly from Habermas' understanding of public sphere and argues that India is characterized with a strong presence of public sphere in which media (newspapers) plays a massive role in both directly and indirectly shaping political public opinion of the electorate.

Consequently, it can be ascertained that this paper begins with assumptions close to Habermas, and later with the progress of the study, towards the conclusion, finds Chomsky more relevant. In this light, public sphere as the focus of media for generating public opinion is the point of beginning, and it is only with the findings unfolding that Chomsky's propaganda model becomes important. This is largely due to the fact that the media's close association with politics and economy is not new in India. By the sheer virtue of media as an institution, it has remained integral to political and economic functioning in the state. However, the role of media can potentially be influenced only when there is a relationship of interest between media and the other two actors. Such trends have been observed in the study by studying the nature, visibility and pattern of dissemination of the mediated buzzwords. Also, for studying the role of media in electoral politics, it is crucial to define 'public'. Here, this paper is heavily indebted to Habermas. In the line of Habermas, this study also considers the public to be informed and participatory in nature; just a mere cluster of electorate does not constitute the public.

In this light, it can be claimed that this paper considers Habermas' ideal type of public sphere independence of the public and media, and gradually comes to acknowledge a situation in an actual type of social democratic welfare state where media and public are conditioned by political and economic factors. At the third stage, as the idea of public sphere gives way to a larger propaganda model, and the tripartite relationship between media, politics, and economy vis-a-vis the electorate (representing society) becomes more complicated, this study falls more on Chomsky.

Conclusion

Society centric approach has been a deliberate choice for analysing media's role and influence in General Election 2014 within the broader context that includes two other integral elements of an election, namely, politics and electorate (society). In this light, the society centric approach is a preference over the media centric approach since the latter only deals with media content and functions without the corresponding relations with politics and society. Therefore, the focus of the paper enables the choice of theoretical perspective, without any deliberate or tacit attempt at undermining the dynamism that media as an institution portrays.

Next, the inter-relationship between society, media and politics has been studied extensively by Noam Chomsky and Herman in their Propaganda Model (1988). Occasionally, private owners of media houses have explicit or tacit political connection or affiliation. In this light, at the structural level, media houses are exposed to the country's politics and economic system and possess mutual relationship. Secondly, media not only possesses a close structural relationship with politics and economy, the media-politics-economy interface conditions or affects the influence of the buzzwords on the electorate. This largely happens if the ownership and political connection of the media houses start influencing the editorial choices of the news they publish. In other words, as mentioned in the previous chapters, it has been found that the functioning of media houses in the study was influenced by the economic and political factors that manifested through the type of mediated buzzwords each of them chose to coin and disseminate. Even tacit political preference and economic interests of the media houses can potentially compromise the dissemination of news, which may translate into denial of full information to the electorate, as espoused by Chomsky in

the Propaganda Model (1988). As found here, mediated buzzwords reflected upon the political and economic undercurrents that media houses in the context were subject to; however, it would be unjust to conclude that the buzzwords were completely co-opted by the vagaries of the latter. This point will be further explained at the end of this section.

Next, as it emerged in the study, a sixth filter, i.e., anti-Islam also worked along with the other five filters espoused by Chomsky and Herman. Anti-Islam as a growing sentiment in India before the General Election in 2014 has been epitomized in the mediated buzzwords popularized by the newspapers under consideration, e.g., NaMo, Hindutva, Minority Appeasement, and Gujarat Riot (these were popular buzzwords during the 2014 General Elections). NaMo, as already discussed in the study, bears strong Hindu religious anecdote, while Minority has been clubbed with the term 'Appeasement'. Appeasement by definition means granting concession to potential enemies for maintaining peace. Also, Gujarat Riot emerged as a negative reference to the Muslims before the election. In this light, the study identifies the sixth filter that has acted in identifying and popularizing the mediated buzzwords. Linked to this argument is the issue of professionalism of journalists. Chomsky and Herman have been criticized for not considering professionalism and independence of journalists. As it emerges in the study, journalists cannot exercise professionalism unless that falls in line with the organization policy of the media house they work for. Here, Chomsky differentiates between elite media and quality press. Elite media refers to those media houses that are balanced in their worldviews (which presumably would allow more journalistic professionalism), and quality press refers to those media houses which are more populist in temperament (as a result the journalists here also have to follow populist ideology in line with the media houses).

Chomsky (1987) notes that the distorting filters⁴ are stronger in case of quality press than elite media. In the American media, New York Times and Washington Post are referred to as elite media, whereas The Boston Globe and The Los Angeles Times are more of quality press; similarly, in Germany, Süddeutsche Zeitung represents elite media, and Bild is all about quality press. Here, in this context, mediated buzzwords disseminated by The Times of India are more conditioned by the filters and as a result exhibit populist worldview (with most popular buzzwords like NaMo, Gujarat Model of Development, and others), whereas The Hindu exhibits more balanced editorial policy (with buzzwords like Lokpal, among other less popular ones). Fourthly, mediated buzzwords were identified both in terms of frequency of appearance and those that were chosen by the electorate. A gap between buzzwords as identified in newspapers (media) and those surfacing through interviews of the subjects (electorate) shows that media chose to prioritize certain buzzwords over certain others. This further underscores the media-politics-economy interface that enables the media to highlight some buzzwords and underplay the rest even when they make news.

Mediated buzzwords have both direct and indirect impacts on the electorate. This is linked to the level of education and literacy and also the difference between the two. Those with education can read newspapers and would come under direct influence of the buzzwords; however, those without education but with only literacy (can only sign) would be indirectly influenced by the buzzwords. Indirect influence happens through the participation of the electorate in public sphere, both in rural and urban spaces. For e.g., people gather at tea stalls and informally discuss the political situation in the state, especially before a national election. Newspapers constitute a significant part of such discussions, where those who cannot read much, listen to a person reading out that day's headlines and important news reports to them. During these occasions, buzzwords are read out and later discussed at length. Since the buzzwords are easy to remember, they stay in the memory of the ones participating in such discussions in the public spheres.

Lastly, linked to the previous finding, mediated buzzwords, although analyzed only in newspapers, appear to have a larger impact when discussed and deliberated upon in the public sphere. This could further be proved by one of the findings in the study that the buzzwords in general were popular and influential on respondents cutting across all educational backgrounds, to the extent that few of them like Price Rise and Toffee Model enjoyed maximum popularity among the basic literate. Having explained the difference between literacy and education before, this suggests massive popularity of political public spheres as core spaces for discussing and engaging with everyday politics of the state. As a matter of fact, the BJP tried cashing in on this with its Chai pe Charcha campaign strategy before General Elections 2014, which became one of the most popular mediated buzzwords disseminated by the newspapers.

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Notes

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²Economic Liberalization in India was started by the then Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao, with a target of making the country's economy market oriented and to leave enough room for privatization and foreign investment.

³Habermas' developed the idea of public sphere with reference to the nobility in 18th century Europe. However, this study adopts his concept for understanding the relevance of the public and public sphere among Indian voters a large section of whom are illiterate or semi-literate.

⁴In *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988), Chomsky and Edward S. Herman first suggested the propaganda model in which they described five editorially distorting filters applied to news reporting in mass media through which "money and power are able to filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public" (Chomsky and Herman, 1988:2). These filters epitomize the interrelationships between media, politics, economy and society. The first filter relates to size, ownership and profit orientation. "The dominant mass-media outlets are large firms which are run for profit. Therefore, they must cater to the financial interest of their owners - often corporations or particular controlling investors. The size of the firms is a necessary consequence of the capital requirements for the technology to reach a mass audience. This filter relates to the privatized media houses" (Chomsky and Herman, 1988:306). The second filter is about the advertising license to do business relating economic and political elite to media. Since the majority of the revenue of major media outlets is derived from advertising (not from sales or subscriptions), advertisers have acquired a "de-facto licensing authority" (Chomsky, 1991:87). Media outlets are not commercially viable without the support of advertisers. News media must therefore cater to the political prejudices and economic desires of their advertisers. This has weakened the working-class press, for example, and also helps explain the attrition in the number of newspapers (Chomsky, 1991:89). The third filter comes from sourcing mass media news. Information source for news is important to consider in terms of the issue of objectivity in news content. Herman and Chomsky argue that "the large bureaucracies of the powerful subsidize the mass media, and gain special access (to the news), by their contribution to reducing the media's costs of acquiring and producing news" (1991:88). The fourth filter includes flak and the enforcers. Flak refers to negative responses to a media statement or program (e.g., letters, complaints, lawsuits, or legislative actions) or negative publicity of the media. Flak can be expensive to the media, either due to loss of advertising revenue, or due to the costs of legal defense or defense of the media outlet's public image. Flak can be organized by powerful, private influence groups (e.g., think tanks), and the prospect of eliciting flak can be a deterrent to the reporting of certain kinds of facts or opinions (Chomsky, 1991: 89). The last filter refers to anti communism. This was included as a filter in the original 1988 edition of the book, but Chomsky argues that since the end of the Cold War (1945-91), anti-communism was replaced by the "War on Terror" as the major social control mechanism.