

Why Has it Proved so Difficult to Measure the Power of Media?

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Abstract: Today, the power of media seems to be one of the pillars of power systems. People receive information from newspapers, radio, and television broadcasting as well as the internet. They are also the carriers of information by expressing their opinions. Unlike other powers, the media power is more abstract and with a more unclear definition. Therefore, it is vital to find a practical way to measure the media power. However, media researchers meet multiple pitfalls when they plan to measure media power and set a benchmark (Graber, 2011). This essay will analyze the four aspects of power that put forward by some influential theorists. Then, I would decide what the definition or aspects of power should be employed in this essay according to the four definitions of power. At last, three reasons why it is difficult to measure media power would be given. My argument is that there are three obstacles—the control or the connection of media from politicians, the rise of social media and the lack of sufficient index.

Keywords: Media power; Power definition; Media influence; Social media; Power measurement

1. Definition of Power

Before talking about what the media power is, the definition of power used in this essay should be decided at the beginning. As with other basic concepts, different people have different ideas about the definition of power. Broadly speaking, it includes power over people or the nature (Nye, 2012:5). By referring to dictionary, power is a transformative influence attributed to social structures or institutions, rather than to individual will. (Chandler and Munday, 2016) Also, the definition of power which was accepted by most theorists changed from ‘power over’ to ‘power to’. According to Max Weber, power (over) means ‘the ability to exert control over people, even against their own will’ and this view emphasized power in institutions. After the Second World War, the Hobbesian view of power gradually prevailed. The “three faces” of power put forward by Robert Dahl, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz and Steven Lukes provided a relational power system (Haugaard and Clegg, 2013).

The first “face” of power was defined by Robert Dahl in the 1950s. In his opinion, A holds the power to B if A could make B do something that B would otherwise do (Dahl, 2005). In this case, the power could be measured by finding out how much preferences have been changed. In the 1960s, Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz stated that Dahl ignored another aspect of power. If there is no decision-making, A could set the agenda or pull B’s preference out of the table to keep the power over B (Nye, 2012:11). However, these two aspects of power are both constrained by behaviorism and with this prerequisite that there are conflicts between A and B. Therefore, Steven Lukes offered the “third face” of power. By avoiding the conflicts in the first place, A could misguide B to take an action which is actually of A’s benefits (Lukes, 1974).

2. Definition of Media Power

The first three aspects of power all focus on the dominating relationship that there is a hierarchy between two sides. However, with the development of society, the networks of power are becoming more and more significant (Nye, 2012). Foucault thought of power as productive and not confined to elites. That is to say, power is not a tool for domination in a general system that exerted by one group over or to another (Dore, 2009). His opposition to the single central structure of power is in contrast to the traditional definition of power. Foucault underlined the power itself instead of excessive emphasis on setting up and direct interaction (Freedman, 2015a). Besides, Foucault pointed out that the implementation of power cannot proceed without truth and knowledge. Truth-knowledge is the backbone of power. Power could increase with the accumulation of knowledge (Polifroni, 2009). Media, the means of mass commu-

nication, provides an access to knowledge. With the widespread of the internet, individuals could obtain the knowledge, make their choices and even make difference to agenda-setting.

Another concept which helps to definite the power of media in this essay is “power as resources”. What distinguishes it from behavioral definitions is the order between actions and power. In behaviorism view, power results from actions and this order is reversed if the power means resources. The function of media is to be the channel or agency through which communication takes place (Chandler and Munday, 2016) .Media organizations who own the reliable information sources are more likely to gain power.

3. Measurement of Media Power

Due to the multi-faceted characteristic of the media power, how to measure it becomes a tricky matter. I would give three reasons to explain why it has been proved so difficult to measure the power of media. The first explanation is the lack of variation in message or the high concentration of media companies. Even if in some intense political campaigns, public opinions still fail to shake the outcome since the political stances of the news companies and participants of the campaigns have been fixed. For example, the New York Times has fostered Democratic candidates in most cases for almost 40 years (Graber, 2011). This phenomenon mainly stems from the monopolization in the media and the media power within political institutions. In 2014, Rupert Murdoch’s 21st Century Fox made an offer to buy Time Warner in June after the planned merger between Comcast and Time Warner Cable. Even if this proposal failed, it had induced a huge reaction to the threat of excessive media concentration(Prat, 2018). As for the British press, a significant proportion of it was under the control of three brothers—the Harmsworths. They owned a lot of widely known newspapers such as The Times, The Daily Mail, The Daily Mirror as well as Sunday Mail. Stanley Baldwin once criticized the press barons that they did not only make contributions to the democracy but also tended to influence or even change the public opinions on the basis of their own preferences(Eldridge, Kitzinger and Williams, 1997:29).

Moreover, the damage to democracy would be severe if these media barons share interests with political parties or politicians. Generally, the voters read the candidates mostly from media platforms. Therefore, the politicians cannot avoid being dependent on media to some degree. The Financial Times pointed out in 1987 that the Thatcher government had spent almost 31 billion pounds on advertising which made the government as one of the largest advertisers in the UK(Eldridge, Kitzinger and Williams, 1997:29). On the other hand, due to the changed funding system, some media companies have no choice but to seek financial support from the public or private sectors since subscription revenues are over. One of the evidences of the close connection between politicians and media owners is the Chipping Norton set. The attendees of this notorious group gathered from time to time. What is more controversial, not only the members included the David Cameron group, the daughter of Murdoch, former News International CEO Rebekah Brooks and other famous but also some of them have been directly involved in the phone-hacking scandal(Freedman, 2015b).

The second impediment in measuring media power arises from the interference of social media, especially self-media. As of July 2023, there were 5.19 billion internet users globally, constituting 64.6% of the world’s population. Within this total, 4.88 billion, equivalent to 59.9% of the global population, were social media users(Statista, 2023).The advent of social media has threatened asymmetrical power relationships, affecting the observation and assessment of power dynamics. Social media influences user behavior, but conversely, users also influence it. In this scenario, our societal system must encompass a subsystem that determines social media behavior in the absence of user participation. However, this is evidently unattainable as the fundamental essence of social media is characterized by high-frequency user interactions. Another interpretation posits that the existence of social media does not demonstrate the power of the media but rather transforms the platform into an amplifier of influence. In other words, the strong connection between social media information and public opinion does not elucidate the influence of self-media but underscores that individual opinions can be infinitely magnified through online discourse. (Qiu,2023).

Thirdly, even though some organizations or scholars offered some methods to measure the power of media, there still exist some inadequacies put forward by themselves. Anya Schiffrin and Ethan Zuckerman provided three indicators—the reach, influence and impact of media. However, the more reach does not mean the more impact because of the existence of the web bots and exaggerated headlines. What’s more, it is difficult to find out the actual percentage of media influence by excluding other factors. At last, the social impact which is called “the last mile problem” may make little difference in some cases of measuring the media power. The reason is that even an article that failed to obtain wide circulation can contribute to a change if the readers are willing to act according to the articles. (Schiffrin and Zuckerman, 2015) Moreover, Prat proposed a new media power index that evaluated power across all media platforms. What distinguishes it from other measures is that the basic units are not markets but voters. Since every voter has the right to choose his or her trustworthy news outlets and support them by actions, the power of a media company can be calculated by its ability to change people’s preferences and choices. However, this new index can only measure the maximum potential for media instead of

measuring actual media influence. (Prat, 2014)

Conclusion

There are three difficulties to measure the power of media. The first is the interplay between the power of media and politicians as well as the high media concentration. Secondly, individuals are endowed with some media power resulting from the rise of social power and it increased the difficulty to measure the media power because of the large number of heterogeneous information in the era of big data. Finally, some existing indicators including “reach”, “influence” and “impact” are not adequate for accurate measurement.

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